

# First One Loses

abitcfstardust

Life with Derek

Complete



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## Table of Contents

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- Cover
- Title Page
- Copyright Information
- Table of Contents
- Summary
- 1. Heavy Words
- 2. Pandora's Box
- 3. George's Old Trick
- 4. Late-Night Realizations
- 5. Call It Intuition
- 6. Reading Problems
- 7. Tough Decisions
- 8. The Last Piece of the Puzzle
- 9. Unwelcome Guests
- 10. Musk and Wood
- 11. Us
- 12. Maybe a Little
- 13. A Few More Minutes
- 14. Better Judgement
- 15. Epilogue: No One Loses

## Summary

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### Description:

Everything was a game to Derek, and Casey knew it.

Yet she indulged him, and she also knew it.

But when Emily misinterprets her during a conversation and implies that Casey has feelings for her stepbrother, it's not a game anymore.

Not when she can't trust her own heart.

Not when it puts everyone's lives in jeopardy.

## 1. Heavy Words

---

*“Ugh, I hate him. I hate him so much! If he thinks he can just keep ruining my life and I’ll just go with it, he’s so wrong. I can’t believe this jerk, I swear—”*

“What did he do now?” Emily asked in a mechanical tone, her disinterested expression revealing how she had already gotten used to Casey’s usual rambling. She looked up from the fashion magazine she had been reading for the past ten minutes while waiting for her friend, sitting on the first step of the stairs. “And where *were* you? The bell rang, like... fifteen minutes ago.”

“He tried to kiss me.”

Emily’s eyes widened. Casey certainly wasn’t expecting her friend to be so surprised, but she considered her own feelings about what had happened and judged the reaction appropriate. Her blood boiled, her skin seemed to burn with the mixture of indignation and confusion.

Emily dropped the magazine onto her lap, staring at Casey in astonishment. “*What?*”

“*I know!* You know what? I need to talk to Paul. Then I’ll talk to the principal and get him suspended. Or better yet, *expelled*. See how much fun he’ll have when he has to find another school.” She sighed, her shoulders slumping. “But I don’t want to ruin his future. Not that he *has* one when he’s such a... ugh! He lives to make my life a living hell, I swear.”

“Okay, I’ll need a few more minutes,” Emily said, patting the step beside her for Casey to sit down. She obeyed. “I can’t *believe* it! I didn’t think he would ever admit his feelings to himself. Let alone *act* on it.”

Casey frowned, turning to her friend. “I don’t know about *feelings*. But he’s been pretty vocal about it.”

“He *has*? ”

“Well, yeah... he’s been doing it for a long time. What’s with you, Em?”

“I mean... I just thought you never noticed.”

The crease between Casey’s eyebrows intensified. “He couldn’t have been more *obvious*. All the bickering... and teasing... and *flirting*. Can you believe this guy?”

Emily tilted her head to the side, silently agreeing. “But why aren’t you more... freaked out, though? I always thought that if it ever happened, you’d be sinking in anxiety.”

“I *am* freaking out. And before you say anything, *no*, I *don’t* like him. Does he think that just because he’s cute and charming, any girl will just fall in love with him? Just like that? Well, *not me*. Not to mention it’s... *wrong*.”

“Not really. You’re not, like... *actually* related.”

Casey raised an eyebrow. “We’re not related... *at all*? ”

"Exactly! Hence, there's nothing wrong with that," she insisted, proudly.

Casey blinked, momentarily stunned by Emily's words. Nothing she said made sense at that moment.

Noticing Casey's gaze, Emily sighed. "Okay, look. I know you must be having an internal crisis right now, but you don't have to lie to me. I know you, I see the way you act when he's around. You may say you don't like him, but... you're in denial, girl."

"I'm not in *denial*," she retorted, frustrated.

"Casey, haven't you ever wondered why you always say your type is his total opposite and yet you always end up dating someone *exactly* like him? *That's you in denial!*"

"*What?*"

"You say you want a romantic, sensitive guy, but you always end up either with a bad boy type, a popular guy or an asshole. Sometimes, all of them in one. And the moment the guy you always described as the one for you shows up, you don't even *consider* him."

"Who the hell are you talking about?"

"*Noel*. The guy writes poetry, for crying out loud! And you never saw him as boyfriend material. You want to *distance* yourself from everything Derek is and stands for, but you always end up *going back* to it."

"*Derek?*" She practically yelled, not caring about the curious glances she received from the students passing by, unlike Emily, who smiled halfheartedly at two girls who literally stopped what they were doing to stare at them. If Casey had been upset a few moments ago, she was completely disturbed now. "*Why on earth* would you think I was talking about *Derek*? That would be—I don't even—how do you—" The idea seemed so out of place that she couldn't find words to form a coherent answer.

Emily looked embarrassed when she raised her eyes to meet Casey's. Regret was practically written in red ink on her forehead. "*Oh, my God*. Who were you talking about?"

"*Truman*."

"Oh..."

Casey opened her mouth, but nothing came out. Everything Emily had said just seconds ago rewound into her mind like a jammed CD that repeated the same sentence over and over. *You may say you don't like him, but you're in denial*. Was this how Emily, her best friend and main witness to her animosity towards Derek, perceived her? How could she even uphold that idea?

"I just assumed... you're always talking about Derek, complaining about something he did and I thought... *oh, my God*."

Casey stood up promptly. "I need to go."

Emily imitated her and gripped her wrist before she could turn around, a pleading expression masking her face. "I'm sorry, Case. I don't even know what to say."

"Well, that makes two of us. How could you even *consider* the idea of me liking..." She frowned, shaking her head to ward off the images Emily had implanted in her mind. "*What the hell, Em?*"

"Fine, I can't take it back. I'm sorry if I offended you, but... will this make things weird between us? *Please*, tell me it won't. I really can't have you hating me because of this. I'm so sorry."

Casey smiled humorlessly, shaking her head in disbelief. "I'm going to class."

"But we still have forty minutes. Please, just... let's sit down and talk about Truman!" she suggested, trying a smile that seemed overly enthusiastic.

"Talk about Truman?"

"Talk about me?" Truman echoed, suddenly appearing beside them and startling Casey in the process. He smiled at Casey as casually shoved his hands in his pockets. She felt her skin heating up, but wasn't sure if it was due to the embarrassment of seeing him hours after he had tried to kiss her or to the way he was looking at her.

Truman was cute, she couldn't deny it. And she hated — deeply — that haughty countenance and peculiar arrogance of his personality, but she *also* hated — deeply — the fact that she was slightly attracted to it. Suddenly, Emily's voice rang in her head again. *You always end up either with a bad boy type, a popular guy or an asshole.* Truman was all of them combined. She gritted her teeth and focused on Truman's face to prevent herself from committing a crime against her best friend.

"You really can't get me out of your mind, can you?"

Forget it, she would commit a crime against both her best friend and Truman now.

"Get lost, Truman," Emily said.

"In a minute," he replied, lifting his index finger without even looking in Emily's direction. Leaning over to Casey, he grinned. "Are you doing something today?"

"Getting away from you this exact minute." She motioned to leave, but Truman's hand found her arm and she turned impatiently to him.

The boy sighed, his almost mischievous expression softening. "Look, just... hear me out, okay? You can get away from me after this, if you still want to. I was just wondering if you'd like to go to the movies with me."

She raised her eyebrows skeptically. "*Are you kidding me?*"

"No." He reached into the back pocket of his pants and pulled out two tickets. "I already bought the tickets."

"You tried to kiss me!" she accused him, as if that was a good enough response to his invitation.

"Okay, all I did was lean in and when you made it clear that you didn't want to, I didn't kiss you. Now I'm asking if you want to see a movie with me. That's all. I have tickets and I'd like you to have one of them. Take this as an apology."

Casey's eyes flew to the tickets in Truman's hand and then to Emily, who stared at the lockers across the hall as if they were the most amazing things she had ever seen. She looked at Truman again, crossing her arms. "Why would I say yes to you?"

"Because you want to?"

"You're a jerk."

"Just... take it as a peace offering. I'd like to be your friend."

He had found her weakness. In one second, she felt like slapping Truman in the face and telling him to stay away from her; in the next one, she felt bad for him. In all her experience, Casey had learned that no one was entirely good or bad. Maybe Truman just needed time to trust her with a side of his personality that looked nothing like what the one he so openly displayed every day.

"Fine," she relented. "But it's *only* a movie."

"Of course, that's what they show in, you know, *the movies*."

Casey rolled her eyes and Truman took the moment of distraction to place a quick kiss on her cheek. She gasped, but didn't have time to chastise him, as he was already heading for the cafeteria.

When she met Emily's eyes, her friend was already staring at her with guilt. She opened her mouth, but Casey lifted a finger, interrupting her. "I have forty minutes before a Physics test that's *very* difficult and I need what's left of my mental stability to do that. Please, don't talk to me right now."

Emily nodded frantically in silence. Casey turned around and marched towards her classroom, feeling the weight of Emily's words on her shoulders — *and boy*, were they heavy. With her heart beating wildly in her chest and her head down, she was certain of getting the first F ever in her academic life.

There was no way to recover from being accused of liking her own stepbrother in forty minutes.

Or ever.

## 2. Pandora's Box

---

She had once slept through a test and had her grades traded with Derek's, but she had never failed on her own. Up until now.

As Casey made her way down the hall towards the front doors amidst the sea of students running for their freedom, she made plans to make up for that merciless test. She tried — and God was a witness to her prayers with each new question she read on the sheet of paper that seemed to be written in Russian — but her thoughts were so focused on what Emily had said that she couldn't discern magnetic forces from magnetic fields even if she had been able to consult her textbook.

Every time she restarted reading the same question, Derek's face would pop into her mind and she would force herself to block it immediately. Casey wasn't about to open that Pandora's box she hadn't been aware of until that moment; and it all became worse when she realized she was afraid of what she would find inside the box if she allowed herself to think about Derek.

"That's ridiculous, you're just thinking about it because Emily put it inside your head—"

"Talking to yourself again, sis?"

Casey let out a yelp at Derek's sudden appearance at her side, jumping in shock. Her brain must have gone down for mere seconds when she tripped over her own feet and staggered. Derek's reflexes, however, helped him firmly hold her arms before she could lose balance. She instantly stepped back to get away from his touch, but her back collided with a locker.

"Ouch!" she shouted, feeling the sharp pain coursing through her back.

Derek burst out laughing, wiping invisible tears under his eyes. If she needed any confirmation that she really despised him, that was it. A few students who passed by them stifled their laughter, casting amused glances towards her.

"Ah, welcome back, Klutzilla. I've missed you dearly," Derek said ironically.

"Shut up, Derek," she snapped, the unusual bad mood returning as she continued her walk down the hall. "Leave me alone."

He followed her promptly. "Oh, I would *gladly* do that if you hadn't *asked* me to. You know how I work, Casey, you brought this on yourself."

Casey rolled her eyes, trying to ignore him completely. She had made plans to avoid him for as long as possible — or until Emily's confession stopped making her stomach churn — but she had forgotten that Derek's main purpose in life was to provoke her. Come to think of it, she had never noticed how much time he spent around her for someone who claimed to hate her.

*Nope. Not opening that box. Ever.*

“So what is it?” he insisted. “Did you get a 98 when you deserved a 98.1? Did Miss Stycer rebuke you for being too participative in class? Or did Paul finally lose it after hearing you complaining and babbling *on and on* about me?”

Casey stopped abruptly, causing Derek to bump into her. He stepped back as she turned to glare at him. Of course, his face bore one of his trademark grins, the one she hated the most.

“Hey, I hit a soft spot. I’m so good at this.”

“I don’t *babble* about you to Paul. It’d imply that you’re actually important in my life.”

He put a hand to his chest, pretending to be offended. “You hurt me with your words, Casey.”

“You’re a...” She pointed her index finger at him, searching for an offense that could give her some sense of dignity, even though it was impossible. But the more she searched for a word, the more his grin intensified — and the more she wanted to erase it from his face with her bare hands. “Ugh!” Giving up on that battle, she started walking again.

“What is it?”

“Why are you so eager to know, anyway? You *hate* talking. You hate talking *to me*.”

“But I also live off your misery, so I really want to know what’s going on.”

Laughing humorlessly, she shook her head. “Emily is clearly out of her mind.”

“So it’s got something to do with Emily?”

“Forget it.”

“Fine, I’ll just talk to Emily later. Fortunately, it’s very easy to make her talk when I—”

Casey turned to him sharply, forcing Derek to halt and raise his hands in surrender as she pressed the tip of her index finger to his chest threateningly. “Don’t start with me now, Derek.”

He raised his eyebrows, clearly confused by her behavior. His hands were still raised, just as Casey’s finger was still piercing his chest — a little too hard. His smile faded, giving way to a softer look. “Are you okay?”

Casey blinked, slowly moving her finger away from his chest until she dropped her hand completely. It was as if she had been pulled from the sea a second before drowning. She knew Derek loved to ruin her day, but he knew his limits. The moment his offenses hurt her, he always backed away.

Derek frowned subtly, arranging the strap of his backpack over his left shoulder. Of all times to be a decent human being, did he have to choose that moment? When her mind was so messy she couldn’t find an answer to the question he had asked at least ten seconds ago? She stared at him blatantly, until she realized what she was doing.

“Casey?”

“Yes,” she said, averting her eyes to the parking lot. She had been so oblivious to everything during her fight with Derek that she hadn’t realized they had left the building. She

noticed Emily leaning against the Prince a few meters away.

Since getting joint custody of the car, they had been giving Emily rides to school. She groaned mentally. If a car ride with Derek would be awkward enough, a car ride with Derek *and* Emily would be even more. She cringed at the thought of the silent trip home — ten minutes of torture upon Emily's look of judgement, Derek's confusion, and her own messy feelings.

Casey was positively certain that she couldn't stand Derek most of the time, but she hated the fact that she was questioning that assumption right now.

"Ah... maybe... you want to talk to Emily about it?" Derek suggested awkwardly, making her turn her attention back to him. Whether he was being kind or avoiding what he thought was an impending session of tears, she didn't know. But she was sure the answer to that question was 'no'.

"I don't want to talk to Emily."

Derek raised his eyebrows. "Well... *that's* not going to be an awkward ride home."

"I'm not going with you."

"Why?"

Over her shoulders, she noticed Truman walking towards the parking lot. Knowing her initial idea was not ideal, but good enough to spare her from that embarrassing situation, she pulled Truman's arm as he passed them. Hooking her arm around his, Casey looked meaningfully at the boy, hoping he would understand the message and go along with it.

"Truman's giving me a ride today."

She hid her surprise at Truman's lack of hesitation to agree to that information, looking at Derek with a self-satisfied smile. *Bless his narcissistic nature.* "Yeah, I was looking for you."

Derek raised an eyebrow again, glaring at Truman. Then his eyes met Casey's and he shrugged. "I mean, I'm *literally* going to the same place as you?"

She knew he would kill for a chance not to have to tolerate her for the ten minutes that would take them to get home, so she didn't understand the reason for his insistence. Maybe it was the obvious animosity between the boys, which she didn't know of up until that moment.

Truman — bless his acting skills now — answered for her. "We're not heading that way, actually," he said, wrapping his arm around her waist. Casey shifted uncomfortably, but didn't move away. Derek's gaze caught the movement, but he just nodded.

He took the car keys from his pocket and twirled them between his fingers, starting to walk backwards. "You kids have fun," he said sarcastically, assuming his usual nonchalant smile. Something flashed in his eyes as he looked at Casey before turning and walking to his car.

Casey watched him silently until she noticed Emily's gaze on her from a distance. Quickly, she turned to Truman, pulling his arm from her waist. "I didn't give you permission to touch me."

"I didn't give you permission to *use* me, yet here we are," he countered with a wry smile, gesturing for her to follow him. "Why *did* you use me, anyway?"

"I really can't handle a car ride with Derek right now."

"What did he do now?" His tone suggested a pattern, it was the same one Emily had used that day. As if she always had a reason to be angry with Derek — and she always had. "You two are kind of always fighting. It's like your lives are based on each other's. It keeps us excited."

He unlocked his car and Casey sat in the passenger seat, fastening her seat belt. "My life's *not* based on *his*! And what do you mean by *us*?"

"The school in general."

"Alright, this is... mean."

"It's not *mean*, it's just healthy fun," he said, starting the engine. "I fight with my sister all the time. Only I don't *talk* about it all the time."

"I'm *not* his sister!" she answered promptly, to which he laughed, checking his rear mirror for students that might be walking behind his car.

"Maybe that's the problem."

"What?"

"All the changes that happened in your lives. Maybe you think it's his fault and he thinks it's *your* fault. You two just don't see each other as siblings," he concluded, shrugging and glancing at her. "And you were put in a situation where you kind of have to. It sucks."

Casey turned her face to the window, watching the landscape gradually turn into a blur. Truman was right. Maybe she didn't blame Derek for the radical changes in her life — that was on Nora and George, and she would never blame them for bringing their families together when she had gained Marti and Edwin as siblings, whom she loved. Those were just changes, circumstances of life. But Derek didn't see her as a sister, nor did she see him as a brother.

They were not friends either.

The question remained in her mind during the entire ride.

*What do I see Derek as, then?*

### 3. George's Old Trick

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"Hey, would you mind telling me where you were?" Nora asked just as she walked through the door at exactly 5:22 pm. With her hands on her hips, Nora's eyes required an immediate response.

Casey set her backpack by the wall and approached her mother carefully. Nora wasn't one to get stressed easily, but this time she seemed especially concerned about her tardiness.

"Truman gave me a ride. Sorry, I should've called. I just assumed Derek would've told you."

"Oh, no, he *did*," Nora agreed, crossing her arms. "But it's almost five thirty, classes are over for an hour now."

Casey smiled wryly, finding her mother's behavior odd. "Mom, we just stopped at Smelly Nelly's. We talked a little and now I'm here. I'm okay, see?"

Nora sighed, softening her gaze over her daughter's face. "I'm sorry, kiddo. It's just that I don't know this guy and from what Derek tells me—"

"*What* did Derek tell you?" she asked promptly, suddenly unnerved at the mention of the boy that had been disturbing her since that morning, even without knowing.

Before Nora could answer, Derek came out of the kitchen with a carton of milk in hands and a carefree smile on his face, walking towards them. "Heard my name."

Casey walked up to him, determined. "What did you tell my mom about Truman?"

She didn't even care about what Derek had said, but the mere fact that he had meddled in her life when she wanted to vehemently avoid him made her nervous. And *maybe* she was also secretly curious about why he would criticize Truman, since they seemed very unfriendly with each other a few hours ago.

Derek shrugged casually, stepping forward, recreating once again that childish dance they did each time they fought. It was like a fight for stupid dominance over who intimidated the other the most. He seemed to be enjoying the situation way too much. "I don't know much about the guy. Don't care enough."

She stepped forward again and felt the tips of her sneakers touch Derek's, lifting her chin up. "That's funny, because she just told me you had *plenty* to say about him."

Derek opened his mouth to answer, but Nora put a hand on his shoulder and gently pushed him back. He relented, but continued to grin at Casey when Nora intervened. "That's not exactly what I said. I just asked Derek who he was and... well, maybe I'm worried over nothing. Just... next time you take a detour, let me know, okay?"

Casey looked at Derek briefly, rolling her eyes at the amused smile he offered her as he drank his milk straight from the carton, and nodded to her mother. "I'm going out with him tonight."

“Tonight?”

Derek practically spat his milk, wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt. It somehow sounded like a victory to Casey, who smiled as she nodded. “In two hours. I need to hurry.”

“Where are you going?”

“The movies.”

“Ooh, the *movies*.” George suddenly appeared in the living room and Casey wondered if the whole family was hiding in the kitchen in order to listen to the unusual conversation going on there. At that moment, she was contemplating death; she briefly fantasized about meteors falling over the house and ravaging everything around her. It would be less embarrassing.

“The old trick that never fails,” George continued, approaching Nora from behind and pretending to stretch before putting an arm around her shoulders. Nora smiled sweetly at her husband, and Casey had to admit, for two seconds, that they were adorable. “I used it on your mother. You’re never too old for clichés.”

“Oh, dad,” Derek complained, grimacing, “I could’ve happily lived a full life without that image in my head.”

“Hey, I taught you this trick.”

“And I never *used* it, thankfully. And never *will*.” His brown eyes met Casey’s with an unreadable expression. “But Casey might fall for it, she’s a sucker for this kind of lame stuff.”

“Hey, why don’t you go do something useful, like disappear from my life?” Casey retorted, offering him a sarcastic smile.

He grinned and gave a wry salute with his hand before returning to the kitchen. George quickly persuaded Nora into letting Casey go, and she thanked him with a smile, although she already regretted agreeing to go to the movies with Truman before she even climbed the stairs for a quick shower.

When she went back to her bedroom, Lizzie and Marti were already there, both sitting on her bed. The first was flipping through a magazine while the second played with a doll.

“Oh, hi, girls. Sure, come in,” she said playfully.

Lizzie smiled, leaving the magazine on the bedside table and crossing her legs over the bed. “Do you have a date?”

“It’s not a *date*. Actually... I’m not even sure we’re friends. Truman is taking me to the movies to apologize for being a jerk to me.”

“Will there be other people there?”

“No.”

“Then it’s a date,” concluded Marti, who didn’t seem to be listening to the conversation until that moment. Her argument was valid. She set the doll aside and looked at Casey. “Is he pretty?”

"Yeah, but his personality isn't." Casey rethought that phrase for a second. During those minutes they spent together that afternoon, Truman had been decent. A sentence worth a roll of her eyes here and another arrogant comment there, he had been perfectly polite. "He's always praising himself, thinks every girl is falling at his feet, doesn't care much about doing the wrong thing as long as he's having fun. He's just always... getting on my nerves."

Marti chuckled. "He sounds like Derek. But don't tell him I said that," she added in a whisper.

Casey forced a smile. She didn't need to be reminded of her boy preferences being supposedly similar to Derek for the second time that day. Just because her ex-boyfriends were popular, sports-inclined, and what would be considered cool, it didn't automatically make them similar to Derek.

*Did it?*

"Casey?" Lizzie was suddenly on her feet, snapping her fingers in front of her sister's face.

"What?"

"I asked what you're going to wear."

"Oh..." She turned to the closet and opened the door, considering her options. "I'm not sure. I'll just grab the first outfit I see and be done with it."

"But it's a *date*," Marti insisted. "Shouldn't you dress less... like you?"

Lizzie scolded the girl with a chuckle. "Marti!"

"Okay, I don't need that kind of negativity right now," Casey said, opening her arms to scoop Marti into her lap. "Go to your rooms, I need to change."

"Fine, but let us know when you're ready," Lizzie asked, leaving the room next.

Casey was about to put Marti on the floor when she clung to her stepsister's neck and leaned in to whisper in her ear. "I like your clothes. I just don't think you should date Truman. Maybe if you put on different clothes, you won't look like you and he won't try daddy's old trick."

Practically jumping from Casey's lap, Marti leaped out of the room, closing the door behind her. Casey laughed through her nose, shaking her head at the little girl's wild ideas before turning back to the closet. It didn't take long for her to decide on a flowery yellow dress that she had gotten from Emily on her last birthday. After applying her makeup, she looked at her own reflection in the mirror and noticed that she had used pink eyeshadow. Whenever she went on dates, she would always choose blue eyeshadow to impress boys.

Casey wondered if she was unconsciously following Marti's advice and stepping away from her usual style to keep Truman away. The more she thought about Truman approaching her, putting his arm around her shoulders and trying to kiss her in a dark room, the more her stomach twitched. And not in a good way.

Sighing decidedly, she pushed away the negative thoughts, put on her flats and grabbed her purse. But when she opened the door, she stopped short upon seeing Derek standing there, his hand frozen close to his chest, as if he was about to knock.

His eyes scanned her dress promptly before returning to her face, looking slightly surprised. She felt the heat irradiating beneath her skin, making her cheeks burn slowly, and cursed herself mentally. Emily had gotten into her head and now she wasn't sure she could act normally around Derek ever again.

No, she wasn't confused. Casey was pretty sure there was nothing but mutual tolerance — and sometimes not even that — between the two of them. But suddenly his eyes seemed more intense than what she remembered, and the fact that Emily had implied that he might like her prodded at her heart painfully.

"What do you want?" she asked, her voice faltering even though she tried to sound impatient.

Derek lowered his hand and recovered his usual countenance in seconds, smirking at her. "Nice to see you too," he replied, walking past her to enter the room without permission. Casey gasped incredulously, but closed the door and turned to look at him. He leaned against her desk and folded his arms, watching her closely. "Truman's here, Nora sent me."

"What? Already?" Casey checked the clock on her bedside table with apprehension.

"Well, it *did* take you almost two hours to... get dressed," he said. When she turned to him again, Derek had his eyebrows raised at her. "I guess you can't do much about the rest."

*Yes, Emily's completely out of her mind.* If she was sure of anything, it was that Derek couldn't stand her as much as she couldn't stand him.

"Why don't you go be annoying outside of my room, asshole?" Casey turned to the mirror to check her makeup. The idea of canceling the plans with Truman — to hell with it, she knew it was a date from the start — was all she could think of right now.

Contrary to her expectations, Derek didn't respond with a shrewd or unnerving remark; he fell silent. Finding his behavior odd and unable to see him through the mirror, she turned to him curiously. He was already watching her with uncertainty, his hands tucked into the pockets of his sweatpants.

"What is it?"

"I thought you hated Truman."

"Why do you care?"

Derek smiled sarcastically, tilting his head to the side. "I *don't*. You do whatever you want, even though I can't *possibly* understand how a guy like him would ever want to go out with *you*. I'm just curious. The guy's been bugging you for weeks, you say you can't stand him and yet, here we are."

"Not that it's any of your business, but we're going out as friends."

He smirked; she couldn't blame his suspicion, she wasn't convinced as well. "And *that's* why you're dressed like that?"

Casey looked down at her dress and wondered if she was overproduced. It wasn't her intention; if anything, she wanted to go unnoticed by Truman now.

"It's just a dress." She looked up at him. "And he's doing it to apologize for everything."

"Yeah. Right." He chuckled, crossing his arms. Even at a distance, his eyes seemed to judge her. "I know game when I see it. And it just happens that Truman and I play the same one."

Casey swallowed. "What, are you saying that you and Truman are the same?"

"Whoa," Derek raised his hands to her, as if she had crossed a line. "Let's not get that far. I'm just saying he has ulterior motives."

She was about to hit her head against the wall. It wasn't enough that Emily and Marti had compared Derek to Truman, now Derek *himself* was doing the same. She masked the feeling with a murderous look cast at him. "Is that what you said to my mom?"

"I just told her he's a regular guy. Moderately good sense of fashion. A little too arrogant for my taste, very self-confident. But *definitely* too cool for you. Which she took as him being too *dangerous* for you."

"Because you made it *sound* like it."

"Now *why* would I go to the trouble of doing that? It would imply that I actually *care*."

"You care about ruining my life."

"Hey, look at us agreeing on something," he pointed out, exaggerating his enthusiasm. Derek stepped back from the table and approached Casey, who suppressed the need to move away from him. She didn't need him being suspicious of anything — whatever that anything was. But the moment he stood facing her, only centimeters away, she was sure he had full access to her thoughts. "I'm just saying, the only difference between us is that I don't turn a girl into a challenge."

The thing was, she knew Derek, including all his mannerisms and masks; and he wasn't being sarcastic or ironic. She could see in his eyes that he was being genuine, there was no trace of humor on his face. She felt her own eyes soften over his, absorbing his words.

The thoughts came back like the violent force of water breaking a dam, flooding everything around. She looked down, blankly staring at a button on Derek's shirt. What if Truman knew she knew this was a date and thought she was interested in him? Was she interested in him? What if he just wanted her as a trophy, if she was but a challenge he wanted to win? And why would Derek be worried about that? The question kept echoing in her mind and she suddenly remembered the day he made Scott confess that he was dating several girls at once.

Maybe Derek had always been a decent human being, deep down. And maybe telling Nora that Truman wasn't boyfriend material was his way of sparing her from yet another disappointment without her knowing he cared.

Casey looked up at Derek, who still seemed to be expecting some kind of reaction from her.

"There's still time to give up, Case," he said, his eyes focusing her left shoulder for a moment, as his hand rose just enough for him to play casually with the strap of her dress, as if adjusting it. Casey froze, shivering with the mere brush of his knuckles against her exposed

skin. He shifted his gaze to her, but his fingers remained there, reminding her that whatever she was feeling right now, was caused by him. “But I guess you like assholes, huh?” He finally withdrew his hand and cast her a grin before turning around and leaving the room.

It took her a few seconds to realize that her heart was beating irregularly in her chest. The patch of skin where his fingers had touched were on fire and her eyes went to the door he had just gone through. She felt something forming inside her.

Pure and genuine fear.

## 4. Late-Night Realizations

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He wasn't in the living room when she came downstairs five minutes after calming down. She mentally thanked the stars for saving her from an awkward moment and struggled to survive the endless two minutes in which George pointed out to Truman how beautiful Casey looked, as if she was about to be sold as a bride.

"Are you having second thoughts now?" Truman asked after a few moments of silence in the car. Casey was so focused on her own thoughts that she hadn't realized she had been ignoring him for the past few minutes.

"Huh?"

"Don't get me wrong, but you're always... well, *talking*. And it's been five minutes since you said a word."

"Noooo," she stretched the word, forcing another smile for the boy and making a dismissive gesture with her hand. 'What are you talking about? I'm fine. I'm more than fine. I'm *peachy*.' And, wrinkling her nose at her choice of word, she thought George would have loved it. "Better than ever. I'm just enjoying the evening."

Truman laughed, amused. Damn her inability to lie. "Did Derek say something to you?"

She turned her head so quickly that she felt momentarily dizzy. "Why would Derek have said anything?"

"He came downstairs a few minutes before you, saying you were deciding whether you were, and I quote, '*cool enough to go out with me*'."

Casey gritted her teeth, cursing Derek mentally. "I hate him."

"Did he?"

"What?"

"Say something about me?"

Truman was heading for the parking lot at the moment, which gave Casey a little time to think about it. If she confronted him about Derek's implicit accusations, would he tell her the truth? She didn't say anything until they were inside the theater, sharing a big bucket of popcorn.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked, carefully. The movie hadn't started yet, but she didn't want to disturb anyone with her chatter.

Truman looked at her, his eyes sparkling with curiosity. "What do you mean?"

"This right here. Are we going out as friends?"

"It's up to you," he said, smiling at her. "I've made up my mind."

The lights went out at that moment and Casey turned to the bright screen with her eyes slightly wide. Her heart was racing now; she wasn't used to such objective confessions. She was trying to pay attention to the teaser from another movie, but was extremely aware of Truman's gaze on her.

Ten minutes later and Casey had no idea of the plot of the movie she was watching. She was slightly hungry, but didn't dare to reach for the popcorn, fearing brushing Truman's hand accidentally and starting something she wasn't ready for. Her mind was spinning so fast that she wondered if her blood pressure had dropped from hunger or nervousness. *Is that enough to kill a 17-year-old?*

Surely Derek would be laughing if he could see her right now. Just thinking about that scenario made her squirm with anger; she hated agreeing with him, but maybe he was right about that. Only it was too late now. She closed her eyes and shook her head. That wasn't the time to think about Derek and how entertained he would be with her misery.

Casey snapped her eyes open again the moment she felt a light touch on her shoulders; Truman reached out to wrap his arm around her casually, just as George had predicted.

The warning bells rang inside her mind. She didn't want to be Truman's achievement, but if she left that room at that moment, it would mean that Derek had won. She was aware of the fact that it was childish and immature, but they made everything a challenge. This was a game and the first one to admit the other was right would obviously lose. So if she went home right now, she would be admitting defeat.

But then Truman moved a little closer and she shifted uncomfortably under his arm until she could no longer tolerate it and her anxiety took over.

"I need to go to the bathroom," she murmured, jumping up and out of the dark room.

As she walked to the sidewalk outside, she spotted two cabs across the street. She got into one of the cars and gave the driver the address of her destination. Casey had time to think about each situation that had led her to that moment, but she chose not to. She hated procrastination; she did her homework and projects at least two weeks before their due dates. But feelings? She procrastinated thinking about them until they overflowed. It wasn't smart, but it was practical.

At short-term.

After paying the driver, she got out of the car and stopped on the sidewalk in front of her house. Looking at the front window, she was able to see Edwin and Lizzie watching TV in the living room. The lights on the Davis' porch caught her attention and her eyes went to Emily's bedroom window. The lights were on as well. Their car wasn't in the garage, which meant she was alone.

Casey had sworn to hate Emily for at least another fifteen hours, but that was an emergency. She wasn't ready to be questioned by her family, let alone be the reason for Derek's entertainment, so she didn't think twice before ringing the Davis' doorbell.

Emily answered the door a minute later, raising her eyebrows in surprise. "Hey, Case. I thought you would be out with—"

"Yeah, I left him there."

Emily had the decency to hide her surprise at that statement and move away so that Casey could enter her home. They walked quietly up the stairs toward Emily's room, where she gestured for them to sit on her bed.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked softly.

Casey stared at her own hands. "I don't know why I said yes to him."

"Maybe it was the pressure? He's been trying to go out with you for a while."

Casey looked up at her friend. "Is that a good reason to go out with someone?"

Emily hesitated, trying to figure out the atmosphere around them to decide on an answer that would please her friend. "No...?"

"No," she confirmed. "And I don't know... maybe I was being naive for believing he just wanted to be my friend."

"Well, that's you. You always believe in people. It's not a bad thing, just... sometimes it ends up letting you down."

Casey nodded, her anger toward her friend slowly simmering down. "I just... I don't know how I feel. It's like... he's cute and nice when he wants to be, but... I'm not sure I *like* him. You know?"

Emily smiled sympathetically. "If you're not sure, that's a no. This is more common than you think, Casey. Sometimes we're more attracted to the idea of someone than the *actual* someone."

"That makes sense. I think."

"Do you want to sleep here tonight?"

"I don't want to impose."

Emily rolled her eyes. "You're my best friend, you never *impose*. Besides, my parents think you're a good influence on me, so that wouldn't be a problem."

Casey smiled faintly. "That would be great, Em. I can't go home now."

"Why not?"

"Because then Derek would win."

"Win what?"

She sighed, exhausted. "It's just that... he came to talk to me when Truman arrived. He said a lot of things about him having ulterior motives and that I had time to give up, but I didn't listen to him, *obviously*, and *maybe* he was right and if I go home now, he'll *know* he was right and he *can't win!*"

Casey wasn't even surprised by the look on her friend's face at the revelation. She knew — and hated — the fact that she was so immature when she was around Derek.

"You two are so alike sometimes that it scares me."

Casey gasped. "*I'm nothing like Derek.*"

"In some ways, no. But then again, you stoop to his level pretty fast. It doesn't have to be a game. He was right and you can admit it."

She looked at Emily with incredulity. "*Are you out of your mind?* He won't let me hear the end of it."

"Give him the benefit of the doubt."

"Have you *met* him?"

"Do you want my personal opinion?"

"You're going to tell me anyway."

"Would you be willing to start a relationship you don't want to be in just to get back at Derek and win some weird, childish game? Do you realize how much he's involved in your life because you *let* him?"

Casey visibly dodged, although Emily was standing still. What she said seemed so obvious that Casey couldn't help but feel incredibly stupid for not realizing it before. If Derek had any power in her life, it was because she let him have it. She played his game without even thinking, giving in to his teasing and the anger it caused her. His opinions mattered, because they motivated her to decide how to act. Most of what she did was based on what would either piss him off or make it look like she didn't care enough about him — which, ironically, made it seem like she *did* care about him. Yes, it was as confusing as it sounded.

"Okay," Emily said, patting her friend on the back upon seeing her affliction. "Easy there."

"No, you're right," Casey said. "What is wrong with me?"

"It's okay. We can talk about something else if you want," she suggested.

Casey's eyes went to Emily's, about to give in to resignation. "Why did you say that?" she asked. No more details had to be given for Emily to know what she meant.

She blinked and moved her hand away from Casey's back, sighing. Her eyes were sympathetic over hers. "Sorry, Casey. It's just that you always come up to me with the same speech about hating Derek and I... well, I just assumed you were talking about him again."

"Well, I *wasn't*. And it's *crazy* that you thought I was when I mentioned that he tried to kiss me."

"Why?"

"*Why?*" Casey echoed, her eyes widening with a mixture of outrage and disbelief.

"Yes."

Casey felt her face burning, her hands shaking as a response to the change of rhythm in her heartbeat. "Because he's... *Derek*." That seemed like a good enough answer for Emily to stop asking unreasonable questions. But all she did was shrug.

"I don't see the point you're trying to make here."

"Emily, he's the bane of my existence. He's..." She interrupted herself, scrunching up her nose as she struggled to find adjectives to support her reasons for considering Emily's idea

absurd. But all she could think about was the way her skin seemed to be on fire where his fingers brushed her earlier. She could still feel the goosebumps on her arms. “He’s selfish and... rude and... stupid. He’s been ruining my life ever since we met.”

Emily was already shaking her head in denial even before she finished the sentence, but Casey’s phone ring prevented her from speaking.

Casey reached for the phone in her purse and stared at the name displayed on the screen. “Oh, my God. Oh, God, no.”

“I assume Truman is God in this scenario?”

Casey simply threw the phone over Emily’s legs and she answered the call immediately. “Hi, Truman. Yes, it’s Emily.” She shot Casey a careful look and nodded. “Casey’s with me. She felt sick and called me to pick her up. She was a little embarrassed to tell you what happened and asked me to call you later, but I ended up forgetting about it. Yes, she’s a little better. You too, bye!” She hung up the phone and handed it back to Casey.

“Thank you, Em.”

“No need to thank me, girl.” Her eyes were pitiful over Casey’s face.

“He’s not that bad once you get past the arrogance, you know? But I don’t want to be just another girl he dated.”

“Is that what Derek told you?”

Casey didn’t answer and Emily didn’t push. They fell silent for a few seconds, up until Casey stopped playing with her phone between her hands and looked up at her friend. “I’m sorry for yelling at you this morning.”

“I’m sorry for everything I said this morning. Your friendship is important to me, you know? I know I don’t always say that, but I’m here for you no matter what.”

Casey risked a smile, nodding her head.

Emily’s lips reflected her smile and she got up. “Do you want to eat our weight in ice cream and watch a movie?”

“Yes, please.”

As Emily went downstairs to get the ice cream and spoons, Casey texted her mother, telling her she would sleep at Emily’s. Soon they were both sitting on Emily’s bed, leaning against the headboard with ice cream jars in their hands as they watched Mean Girls. Two more movies came after that one and Casey was able to forget about her problems until the moment Emily yawned and asked if she wanted to sleep. She didn’t, but she wouldn’t force her friend to occupy her thoughts in the middle of the night so that she wouldn’t think about whatever was going on in her life. So she said yes.

Casey borrowed a pajama from Emily’s, brushed her teeth and finally laid down on the bed. Emily fell asleep beside her in less than ten minutes, but Casey continued to toss under the blanket restlessly, unable to even close her eyes.

It was four in the morning when she turned to the opposite side and noticed, through the bedroom window, that the lights in Derek's room were still on. That's when she remembered that when Emily asked why she condemned the possibility of her liking Derek, she hadn't mentioned the fact that he was her stepbrother.

## 5. Call It Intuition

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“Casey, can you please stop looking around like ninjas are going to attack you at any second?” Emily whispered aggressively to her friend, peering at her behind her locker door.

Casey was looking over her shoulder to avoid two specific faces among the students who were already preparing themselves to go to their classrooms. She didn’t want to see Truman after last night’s disastrous date, and she certainly didn’t want to see Derek, knowing he would be able to read her the moment he set his eyes on her.

Before they went to school, Casey had asked Emily to go to her house and get her backpack and books; the clothes she was wearing now were borrowed from her friend. They had to take the bus and Emily didn’t stop complaining about how much easier it would be for them to just get a ride with Derek until they got there. She knew she was a coward, but she wore the title with dignity. Or whatever was left of it.

She looked at Emily, denying the accusation with a sway of her head. “I’m not doing anything.”

Emily eyed her suspiciously. “Mhm.”

“Hey!”

Startled, Casey turned to the sound of Sam’s voice with a hand to her chest, chuckling with embarrassment when she confirmed it was only her friend. “*Hi! Sam!* How are you? You look dashing today. Is it your hair?”

The boy touched his blond strands, confused. “It’s... hair gel?”

“It looks amazing.”

“Sorry about this weirdo,” Emily said, closing her locker and standing next to Casey, who tried to regain composure. “What’s up?”

“Nothing much, I just saw you two hanging out here and came up to say hi.”

Casey approached Sam reluctantly, as if testing the movement. He frowned, but there was an amused smile on his lips, as if he was enjoying her behavior. She leaned towards him as if to tell him a secret. “You didn’t happen to see Truman around, did you?”

“Uh... yeah, actually. I think he was heading to class.”

“Do you know what his next class is?”

“Ah... no, sorry. *Should I?*”

Casey shrugged, moving away from him. “I take it you wouldn’t know his schedule for the day, huh?”

“Oookay,” Emily broke off that awkward dialogue with a hand on Casey’s shoulder and a smile at Sam. “It was nice talking to you, Sam.”

"Oh, wait a sec," he asked, before they turned around. "Ralph is having a party next week. He couldn't come today, but he asked me to invite you both. It's going to be Friday. His place, at seven."

"Is Truman invited?" Casey asked.

"I don't think so. He's not very... *appreciated* among the guys."

Sharpened by curiosity, Emily leaned toward Sam. "Why is that?"

"We don't necessarily have a problem with him, but... we don't love him either, you know? He's always boasting himself and criticizing the boys on the team. He always gets into fights with them. I'm the only one on the team who hasn't quarreled with him yet."

"Wait, so even *Derek* had a fight with him?" Casey asked again, cocking an eyebrow.

"Multiple. The last one was just yesterday. Everyone knows they don't like each other. They're always fighting over stupid things."

"Okay, but *why exactly* did they fight?" Emily insisted, and for the first time in her life, Casey was grateful for her friend's curiosity.

Sam shrugged. "I'm not sure. Sometimes they don't even have a reason."

Emily sighed, clearly disappointed. "Sam, if we have you on the inside, it's so that you can give us hot gossip."

He chuckled. "Count me out, then, because I'm usually the last one to know things."

Emily countered the comment, but Casey was now busy trying to confirm whether the brown-haired head that suddenly caught her attention from a distance belonged to Derek. When the boy walking in front of him turned right, she got the answer. Her heart jumped, suddenly racing, and she gripped Emily's wrist too tightly when Derek saw her.

"Casey, what are you doing?" Emily pulled her wrist, looking worriedly at her, who smiled nervously at Sam.

"It was great talking to you, Sam. Tell Ralph we'll be there. Have a great day. See ya!" She practically dragged Emily away from the boy, and although her friend was still complaining about Casey's strangeness, she didn't refuse to accompany her.

"I was trying to get some info!"

"He clearly didn't know anything and it's none of our business."

"Doesn't matter. Not to mention you're just as curious as me." Emily risked a glance over her shoulder and let out a sound of comprehension. "Oh, I get it. What's your plan here? To avoid Derek, *the person you live with*, forever?"

"I'll come up with something."

"I never thought I'd ever see you winging it in life, but there's a first time for everything."

Casey didn't answer, practically pushing Emily into Mr. Riley's classroom. Emily didn't have much time to continue her interrogation, for the bell rang two minutes later, and Casey was finally able to sink into her chair and try to fight her own thoughts while also trying to

pay attention to Mr. Riley's speech about a war she couldn't bring herself to think about now. There was another war happening inside her own mind.

And she was losing it.

The worst came when she and Emily split up. Casey had a class with Truman before lunch and although she didn't need to have any contact with him during the class itself, he joined her in the hallway on her way to the cafeteria.

"Hey, are you alright?" he asked, keeping pace with her.

"Hmm?" Casey needed a few seconds to recall the excuse Emily had given him the day before regarding her disappearance from their date. "Oh, yeah. Much better, thanks."

"Good, I was worried."

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that," she said, sounding genuine. She felt really sorry — and bad — for leaving him and having to lie out of cowardice.

Truman opened the cafeteria door for her to pass, and they walked to a table near the glass windows overlooking the schoolyard. Casey was uncomfortable, but she didn't have the heart to ask Truman to leave her alone. As she sat facing him, Casey prayed for Emily to arrive soon and put her out of her misery.

"That's okay, you can make it up to me."

She focused her attention on the sandwich Emily had prepared for their lunch that morning. "Make it up to you?"

"Yeah, you could go with me to the new cafe that opened on Hackett? I hear it's nice."

She looked up from her sandwich to Truman, suddenly nervous. In a way, she felt obliged to accept his invitation for leaving him alone the day before, even though she knew it was a stupid and illogical reason to do it. "Ah... I'm not much of a coffee person."

"They serve other things there, Casey," he recalled, smiling playfully.

Casey glanced subtly at the cafeteria door, testing a possible telepathic ability that could immediately summon Emily to that table. *It could happen, right?* Suddenly, she wondered if Emily was stalling on purpose to force her to talk to Truman. Maybe she just needed to be objective and make a decision.

Turning her eyes back to Truman, who was looking at her expectantly, she relaxed her shoulders. He was cute, charming and was making an effort to reach out to her. But Derek's words were still fresh in her memory and she wondered if he really would do everything he had done so far, including that initial stupid idea of ranking girls to capture her attention, just so she could be another girl on his list.

"Well..." she began, looking away to find a good enough answer without the pressure of Truman's gaze on her. But the moment her eyes landed on a random table, she noticed that it belonged to Derek and that he was already watching them with interest. Casey felt her stomach turning. Ralph and Sam chatted excitedly beside him, and as soon as he noticed her, he looked away and reintroduced himself into his friends' conversation.

When she looked back at Truman again, she felt the heat rising from her neck to her cheeks, probably adding a shade of red to them. Obviously, Truman attributed the phenomenon to his charms and she felt the sudden urge to dig a hole in the middle of the cafeteria and hide in it. “Can I get back to you on that? I need to take a make-up test this week and I have to study.”

“Sure. Whenever you’re ready.”

“I’ll let you know,” she agreed, nodding.

“Do you mind if I stay he—”

“Hey, Truman!” Emily exclaimed with exaggerated excitement, approaching the table. “Thank you for saving a seat for me.”

Casey breathed a sigh of relief, biting her bottom lip to suppress a smile as Truman looked up at Emily, trying to disguise his discontent. He stood reluctantly and pointed at the chair. “Sure, no problem. See you girls later.”

“Bye, bye!” Emily waved at him, taking her seat the moment he walked away. Attaching her backpack strap to the back of her chair, Emily leaned across the table to approach Casey. “Are you okay? Are you *blushing*?”

Casey shook her head. “No. And where were you?

“I’m sorry, Mr. Davidson gave me a D and I needed at least a C plus to pass, so I had to tell him a story about my baby brother having a terrible fever last night and me having to take care of him.”

“Did he buy it?”

“Nope, I think I exaggerated a little when I started crying. But he saw my desperation and let me make a project to help my grade up. But enough about me, what did Truman want?” She reached for her own sandwich in her bag and unwrapped it to take the first bite.

“He asked me out again.”

“The guy’s persistent, I’ll give you that.”

“Tell me about it.”

“What did you say?”

“That I’ll think about it.”

Emily eyed her disapprovingly, dropping her sandwich on the table. It would have been comical if Casey wasn’t so stressed out. “Casey, if you don’t want to go out with him, just say so. Don’t keep leading him on.”

She sighed, dropping her own sandwich to rest her elbows on the table and shove her face in her hands. “I know.” Looking up at Emily, she continued: “But I think I’m letting what Derek said to me mess with my head and maybe that’s exactly what he wanted. Maybe I should give Truman another chance?”

"I know you have reason to believe Derek is playing with you given his track record. But I don't think he's doing it right now."

"Why not?"

"Call it intuition." Emily went back to eating her lunch and Casey looked at her own sandwich on the table, her appetite ebbing immediately.

Going against her own instincts, she looked up at the table a few meters from theirs and saw Derek laughing at something Ralph had said. For a moment, she thought it would be much easier to simply ask him what he meant, to try to appeal to the serious side he had shown her the day before, in her room. But when Derek's eyes met hers again, and he didn't look away until *she* did, she knew it was best to stay as far away from him as possible.

For her own sanity.

## 6. Reading Problems

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“How long are you planning on standing in front of your house?” Emily asked impatiently, checking her watch. “Just so I can decide whether I’ll continue to give you moral support, because I’m *starving*.”

“Will you come with me?” Casey asked, looking at her friend. She would feel safer if she had someone — a shield against possible questions from family members — by her side.

“Do you guys have food?”

Casey rolled her eyes. “Yes, we have food, Emily.”

“Okay, then. Let’s go,” she agreed, pulling Casey by the hand.

Edwin and Marti were watching a cartoon on the TV when they came in, and Casey could see George preparing a sandwich in the kitchen, singing some old song out of tune.

“Hi,” Edwin greeted them, lifting a bowl full of popcorn that he and his sister were sharing. “Popcorn?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Emily said, sitting next to Edwin on the couch and stuffing her hand with popcorn. She looked at Casey and smiled. “I’ll be quick, go ahead and call me if you need me.”

“Some friend you are.”

“Thank you, Case. Love you, too.”

Casey smiled and left her coat hanging in the foyer, heading carefully into the kitchen. She was pretty sure that if Derek had been in the kitchen, he would have begged George to stop his awful singing.

“Oh, hi, Casey!” George greeted her excitedly. He put a final slice of cheese on his bread and looked at her. “Want one?”

“No, thank you. I’m not hungry. Where’s mom?”

“She had a client over at the office and had to stay a little late. But she should be here in an hour. Did you want to talk to her?”

“Um... no, it’s fine.”

George nodded and nibbled on his sandwich, leaving it on the counter as he chewed it and put the ingredients back in the fridge. Casey put her hands on the counter, unsure what to do or say. She didn’t want to go up to her room because she didn’t know if Derek was home; his shifts at work were always being changed. *Coward. You can’t avoid him forever.*

“Well, watch me,” she muttered to herself.

“Are you sure everything’s okay?” George asked, turning to her with concern.

"Yeah. What time is dinner?" she asked nonchalantly, partly because she had lied to George and was starving, since she had been unable to eat anything for lunch, and partly because she knew they always had dinner after seven when Derek was working, so he could eat with the family. Nora insisted that they always have dinner together. The best way to find out if he would be home was this.

"Derek's working today, so seven. But I'll let you take a bite out of my sandwich if you want."

She smiled, agreeing with her head. "That's okay. I'll go get changed."

George nodded as Casey made her way to the living room, grabbing a handful of popcorn from Edwin's bowl before climbing the stairs. After changing into a pair of sweatpants and a comfortable shirt, she left Emily's clothes properly folded on the bed. Lizzie knocked on her door a few moments later.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, her face furrowed in curiosity.

"Yeah, why is everyone asking me that?"

"You came back from the date and went straight to Emily's. Then *she* came to get your stuff from school today and you didn't even talk to us."

"Everything's fine," she repeated, forcing a smile.

"Was your date bad?"

Fearing that Lizzie might accidentally tell Derek or Edwin the truth, she lied. "No, it was great. I just felt like going to Emily's. Sorry, I didn't know you were expecting me."

Lizzie smiled. "It's okay." She jumped on Casey's bed, patting the mattress for her sister to join her. "Now tell me all about yesterday."

She did. *All lies*, but she did. As Derek had once rightly pointed out, she couldn't lie, and had to be as vague as possible about everything she was making up. Lizzie didn't seem to suspect anything and even helped her retell the story when Nora, Emily, and Marti appeared in the room a few minutes later to join the conversation.

Emily was invited to dinner, but couldn't stay because she needed to start her project for Mr. Davidson's class. Cowardly, — what else is new? — Casey told Nora she wasn't feeling well for dinner the moment she heard her and Derek's car being parked downstairs. Fortunately, Lizzie offered to bring her a plate of food when dinner was over.

She heard Derek's bedroom door open minutes later, and held her breath, as if that might stop him from knowing she was home. She didn't even know why she was avoiding him: was it because she didn't want him to know about her *real* date with Truman and that what he said had gotten into her head or because of what Emily had implied the morning before? The mere fact that Derek was a wall away from her made her nervous. And what did that say about her?

Casey never left her room and limited her trips to the bathroom to the fullest. She tried to sleep at ten o'clock — unsuccessfully, of course — and decided to stare at the ceiling until her eyelids grew tired. They never did.

She wasn't able to stick to her plan as well, which consisted of staying in her room until the next morning. It was past one in the morning when she felt thirsty — blame it on the excess of salt in her food, which she was sure was George's doing. She tried to ignore it vehemently, but eventually, her throat felt like sandpaper and she got out of bed. Assuming Derek was asleep anyway, she left her room — and then she wondered if God hated her for some reason, because as she closed the door, she heard another click behind her.

Cursing under her breath, she looked back and saw Derek coming out of the bathroom. With a frozen hand on the doorknob, she knew she wouldn't have time to return before he saw her and cursed herself for the way her heart complained the moment Derek looked at her.

He stopped in his tracks, standing a few meters from her. Casey didn't know why it was suddenly so hard to find something to say when his eyes were on hers. It never used to happen before. Which is why she blamed it all on Emily again, for messing with her head.

Derek decided to walk over to her and, anticipating the tension that was about to settle between them, Casey spoke the first neutral thing that came to mind. "I was just going to get some water."

He stopped in front of her, yawning as he leaned his shoulder against the wall. There was something adorable and equally appealing about his messy hair — and she immediately scolded her own thought. He seemed to notice her staring and ran a hand through his hair, which only made it worse. Ironically, it made him look even better.

*Hot*, her mind corrected her. *What the hell?*

"Thanks for the update," he replied, his voice slightly hoarse from sleep.

Casey rolled her eyes; all the confusing feelings regarding the boy that stood in front of her crumbling with his peculiar ability to get on her nerves. "Good night, Derek."

"Why are you avoiding me?" he asked suddenly, seconds before she took the first step to escape that conversation and grab her damn glass of water.

Casey averted her eyes to the railing of the stairs, shaking her head frantically. Never mind, her feelings were still as messy as her life.

"Why would I be avoiding you?"

"You tell me. You've been doing it all day."

"No, I haven't."

"Then why aren't you looking at me?"

She took a deep breath, focusing on the sole purpose of ending that interaction as soon as possible. Surely Derek knew her well enough to know that she was, in fact, avoiding him.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed him moving closer, his shoulder still leaning against the wall. Her stomach twisted in reaction to the movement and she gritted her teeth in anger at him, but mostly at herself. *It's just natural aversion to your annoying stepbrother*, she told herself. But the excuse sounded so stupid she sighed in defeat.

"Was I right?"

She looked up at him involuntarily, meeting his gaze. “About what?”

“Truman.”

“No.”

“So, why did you come home less than an hour after leaving?”

Casey opened her mouth to answer, but stopped as she absorbed the question. “Were you stalking me or something?”

“No, I heard a car parking in front of the house and saw you walking to the Davis’. I figured you wouldn’t want to face me and admit defeat.” He grinned, using his bragging tone. The same one that made her want to kill him with her bare hands. “But I *really* wanted to hear it from you.”

“The date was *good*, Derek.”

“Oh, so it *was* a date.” He crossed his arms, allowing himself to get even closer to her. Casey knew he was playing that same old game, trying to intimidate her. She knew all his tricks by now and could turn them on him.

She lifted her chin and stared at him with determination. “Why do you care?”

“See, you keep thinking that I care, but I really don’t. It’s like you *want* me to care.”

She tightened her jaw, exasperated. “I don’t *want* you to care.”

“Hmm.” He narrowed his eyes and she had the audacity to blush as he slowly scanned her face, that faint smirk placed on his lips, as if he knew her darkest secrets. But soon his eyes flickered back to hers. “Well, now that we’ve established that and I know *for a fact* that you’re lying...”

“I just felt sick and came home, it has nothing to do with Truman or whatever you said about him. Why is that so hard to believe?”

Derek laughed through his nose; his breath tickled her skin and only then did she realize how close they were. This was not uncommon: on numerous occasions, Nora and George had to separate them after some banal argument had turned into a battle for dominance. And somehow, the result was always the same: with her feeling her blood boiling with anger and Derek being amused by it.

Just like now.

“Because you suck at lying, Casey.”

“Well, if I’m just a challenge like you said, why are we going out again?” She hadn’t really accepted Truman’s proposal — nor was she inclined to do so, — but that seemed to be the only option available in order for her to win the argument. Which meant that Emily was right and she was, in fact, willing to go out with Truman to win a childish game with Derek. “He asked me out today.”

“Oh, really?” The sarcastic tone returned to his voice, mixed with sudden hostility. Derek uncrossed his arms and stepped away from the wall, bringing his face closer to hers. She felt the air leaving her lungs momentarily. “Cute. Please, let me know when that *fails* again.”

“Ugh, you’re so immature!”

“I’m not the one willing to make the same mistake just to prove me a point.”

“You give yourself too much credit,” she snapped, feeling anger erode her inside.

Derek grinned and Casey remained paralyzed as her eyes betrayed her and followed the movement, staring at his lips for a second of madness. She swallowed and focused his eyes again, hoping he hadn’t noticed.

“You give me too much credit. Why does it matter if I was right about the guy?”

“You *weren’t*. And here’s another thing you were wrong about: he’s *nothing* like you.”

“Oh, absolutely. I would *never* ask you out. Especially after being rejected, the guy can’t take a hint.”

“I would never *agree* to go out with you,” she quipped, offended, not knowing why they were even arguing about that now. “And I didn’t reject him.”

“Oh, so he *didn’t* try to kiss you and got rejected?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, *I*, for one, wouldn’t try to kiss someone unless they wanted to. It’s called harassment.”

“What if I wanted to?”

“Did you?”

That stopped the argument for a few moments; Casey fell silent as his eyes seemed to burn hers, filled with an intensity that made her skin feel suddenly hot, expecting an answer that he probably knew. No, she didn’t want to be kissed. *By Truman.*

She let out a shaky breath, averting her eyes to the sewing on the sleeve of his shirt. There was a thrilling feeling inside her, a type of excitement that she had never felt before. She was acutely aware of their proximity, but suddenly it didn’t seem close enough. She realized, with a keen feeling of fear that prodded at her heart, that she craved his touch. She yearned to know what it would feel like to just reach out and feel his skin under hers or slide her fingertips over the corners of his lips.

Now. She wanted to be kissed now. She wanted to be kissed by *Derek* now.

*What the actual hell, Casey?* Her heart nearly stopped and she commanded her body to move away, but it didn’t obey her. Her own lungs were failing her again.

“Maybe he *thought* I wanted to,” she whispered, looking up at him.

She wasn’t sure why she was defending Truman, but the main objective at that moment was to divert her thoughts from Derek and disagree with him. If he said the sky was blue, she would vehemently deny it and say it was a deep shade of purple.

“Then he has some serious problems reading you,” he said, imitating her tone. His eyes didn’t leave hers, and Casey wasn’t sure if she would be able to use her legs to get out of that place immediately as her mind screamed at her to do.

She didn't know what he meant by those words — or rather, if she was attributing nonexistent meanings to them — nor would she be able to try to decipher them when she was still searching for oxygen and trying to get the images of him kissing her out of her mind. Maybe she was just misinterpreting everything. She needed to sleep, after all; the insomnia had been her best friend during the past few days.

"Like you can read me *at all*," she managed to mutter. Why? She didn't know. The question wasn't even up for discussion, Derek was merely mentioning Truman's lack of tact. *She was the one bringing Derek into the picture. And what did that even mean?*

*That you want him to kiss you, her mind sneered instantly. Stupid Emily for putting those thoughts in my head!*

Derek tilted his head to the side, as if contemplating a thought. She sucked in her breath and fearfully wondered if he could, in fact, read her.

"Yeah," he murmured softly. His eyes drifted to her lips for a second and Casey felt her lungs emptying for good, making her momentarily dizzy. She felt being pulled to him, her own gaze falling on his lips once again as her own parted, anticipating what could never be. For a moment, all she could hear was the sound of his soft breathing and the drumming of her own heart, creating a lilting symphony she never knew she needed to hear. His name was dancing at the tip of her tongue, but she knew he was playing one of his mind games — and it was working.

*You don't want to kiss him, she told her mind, desperate to grasp for any hint of logic that was still left in her. He's just using what happened to Truman as bait and you're falling for it.*

*Truman.*

She snapped out of her trance, looking into his eyes. "Wait, how do you know about the kiss?"

Derek seemed momentarily taken aback by the sudden change of topic. His eyes were shining with an emotion she couldn't read, but he quickly recomposed himself, shrugging nonchalantly. "Word got out."

"So everyone at school knows about this?"

"Probably."

Casey groaned softly, covering her face with her hands briefly.

"That's okay, Case," Derek said in a fake supportive tone. "Just make sure he knows if you want to be kissed next time, okay? It's not his fault he can't read you so well."

When she lifted her head to look at him, he was smirking. She gruffly pushed him away by his chest, but he barely even moved. "Asshole."

His smirk intensified and he stepped back, reaching for his doorknob without breaking eye contact. "Good night, Casey."

He disappeared behind his door, leaving Casey on the verge of a meltdown. Her skin was hot, although the weather was pleasant. Feeling like crying, she refused to admit what was

more than clear: her body — and her mind — were reacting to him and there was nothing she could do about it but wait for the period of madness to pass.

Now she needed that glass of water more than ever.

## 7. Tough Decisions

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"I don't understand where this is coming from."

Casey looked at her mother, guilt written all over her face like a neon sign in the darkness. Nora was sitting across the counter, her cup of coffee long forgotten on its surface, probably cold; her eyes snapped up to Casey's with a mixture of sadness and confusion.

She thought it would hurt, but not that much.

"I thought you liked living here. With us."

Casey felt the pain eroding inside her, shattering her heart little by little. It hadn't been easy making that decision. Casey's life had always revolved around the most important people in her life: Nora and Lizzie. She had promised herself that she would never abandon them and that only going to college would briefly separate them.

But now she made plans to live with her father. In another city. Far from everyone.

Far from Derek.

God was a witness to how much she loved her family, and that included the Venturis. She considered them part of her, just as she considered her own flesh and blood. But days had passed and she still found herself leaving her room at strategic times and spending half of her days either at Emily's or at the public library to avoid Derek. Most of the time, she sank into her textbooks in the hope of blocking out her chaotic reality. But she couldn't focus on homework when she had clearly been moved by whatever happened that night when she bumped into Derek. She wanted to kiss him. And it was only a matter of time before she couldn't divert from her feelings anymore and ended up ruining her family.

The last family dinner had been the deciding factor, although she still had a few more sleepless nights to reconsider the idea after the occasion. After days coming up with excuses to avoid sitting at the table with her family, she decided she couldn't do it anymore, otherwise they would be suspicious. So her plan consisted of eating her food, only looking at her plate, staying silent and saying she needed to study when it was over.

But it was Nora who made her break the promise. She and George were talking to the kids about school while Casey and Derek remained silent. She wondered if he simply had nothing to add to the conversation or had realized the clear tension that had been slowly building up between them ever since their last encounter in the hall.

Clearly, he now had confirmation that she was avoiding him.

"Casey?" Nora had called her, and when she lifted her head from her food to her mother, she realized that everyone's attention had turned to her.

"Hmm?"

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Mom called you, like, five times and Edwin's burped at least twice and you haven't said a word," Lizzie explained.

"Are you sure everything's alright? We barely see you anymore," Nora insisted. "You spend all your time at the Davis'. Don't you think you're studying too much? You should take a break, sweetie."

"I never thought I'd hear a parent say that to their kid," Edwin chuckled. "Dad, you could learn a thing or two from Nora."

"When you open a book for more than five minutes, I'll think about it," George replied with an self-satisfied smile.

"Finals are coming," Casey said mechanically, shrugging and looking back at her plate, pushing some peas aside with her fork. The weight of the idea of moving from the house was already heavy on her shoulders, and every time she looked into her family's eyes, knowing that they had no idea of her plans, she felt like trash. "I can't really make time for breaks."

"You're making time for *Truman*," Derek finally spoke up, being immediately stared at by everyone, including Casey. His tone was slightly hostile, bordering on accusation. She shot a murderous look his way; this was the first time in days she was looking at him directly.

Casey could practically feel the tension spreading around the table, forming a dome around the family. She noticed Edwin dropping his cutlery on the table, preparing to watch another one of their traditional fights.

"Are you monitoring me now?"

Derek scoffed, dropping his own cutlery and resting his forearms on the table to lean forward slightly. "As if I'm interested in your life."

"How else would you know I'm hanging out with Truman?"

"Are you *dating* Truman?" Marti asked, being naturally ignored. Casey wouldn't look away from Derek until he did; if he was the one defying her, she would continue the argument until he had nothing more to say.

"Should I remind you that Emily is obsessed with me and tells me *everything* she thinks is interesting enough to keep my attention even though I never ask for it?"

Casey rolled her eyes. She had been spending more time with Truman at school and hadn't hidden it from anyone, but she didn't want Emily chattering about it to Derek either. Or anyone else. But especially Derek.

"Why do you hate him so much?"

"I don't hate him. I could care less about this guy," he said, though his altered tone suggested otherwise.

Casey realized that he had leaned even further forward and that she had done the same unconsciously. "Then why do you guys fight every day?"

"Derek, are you getting into fights at school?" George intruded, slightly concerned.

For a moment, Derek seemed surprised that she knew about the fights, but he quickly regained his composure. “None of your business.”

“Is it because he’s better than you?”

He looked deeply offended, laughing in disbelief. “*Better than me?*”

“Yes, better than you. *Infinitely.* Are you jealous of him or something?”

“I’m sorry, are we talking about the same Truman who *ranked* girls? *Including* you? Yeah, I’m not jealous of that.”

“People make mistakes.”

“You tell *me*. You’re making one right now. And I always thought you were at least smart.”

She clenched her jaw. “*Go to hell, Derek.*”

“Casey!” Nora scolded her.

Derek smirked, but there was no humor to the gesture. “Oh, I’m living *in* it right now having this endless conversation with you.”

“Derek!” It was George’s turn to try to intervene, although it wasn’t effective.

Casey stood abruptly, dropping a knife to the floor; the sound seemed to echo through the eerily silent house, and she turned to climb the stairs and lock herself in her room. Table fights with Derek were common, but they had never ended that way.

Lizzie and Nora knocked on her door a few minutes later, but she didn’t let them in. Her heart was beating fast, sharpened by the anger she felt. She didn’t even know why it bothered her so much; they had both said worse things to each other before. But now there was so much more going on.

She didn’t want Derek to point out how unreasonable her decision to give Truman a chance was, because she still wasn’t sure about the boy’s actions. But then again, she had considered kissing Derek just a couple of days before, and she needed someone — as selfish as it sounded — to make her forget about it.

It hadn’t worked out yet.

Part of her hoped Derek would apologize, which obviously didn’t happen; the other part hoped that everything would go away in the morning and that all the confused feelings inside her chest would turn into plain, old animosity. It was easier to hate Derek.

Yet she couldn’t do it.

And now her mother was suppressing tears in front of her, asking her if she no longer liked living with her family.

“*I do,*” she confirmed eagerly. And she did. She loved every part of that family, with all its flaws and abnormalities. The last thing she wanted was to get rid of that bit of peace she had found with the Venturis.

“Then... *why?*”

Casey could almost see the engines spinning inside her mother's head, rewinding memories that might indicate Casey's motivations. Certainly, it wouldn't take her too long to reach a conclusion. The heavy atmosphere established between her and Derek had affected the whole family and it was evident; but they had no idea that the last fight they witnessed was not the main element behind her decision. The game she was playing with Derek was dangerous; he was only messing with her head. But Casey? She was afraid of what he was doing to her.

"Is it Derek?" Nora asked, looking at her pleadingly.

*Bingo.*

Her mother sighed, reaching out to cover Casey's hand. "I know you two fight a lot, but everything can be solved. You always fight, but everything works out in the end, doesn't it? I can talk to him. I'm sure he wouldn't want you to leave this house any more than any of us do."

"Mom, I can't..." She shook her head and looked at the counter. It would be easier not to have to look her in the eye. "I just need a little time... to figure out a few things. And I'd be with dad, I'd be fine. He's moving to Ottawa next week, it's so close to home. I'll call every day and visit whenever I can and—"

"Whenever you can means twice a year, like Dennis does," she said softly, her voice wavering. "I can't... I can't lose you, Casey."

Casey felt a lump forming in her throat. "Mom, you're not *losing* me. Nothing will change, I'll just be in a different place. I'd be going to university next year, anyway."

"You'd still be near me."

No argument would be enough for Nora and she knew that. Not even Casey was convinced by the arguments she had rehearsed for hours the night before. In the end, Nora managed to convince her to think about the topic a bit more before calling her father. She talked to the Davises that very day and they agreed to let Casey sleep at their place for a few nights.

It seemed like a good compromise for now.

As Nora calmed down and Casey left the kitchen to head for her bedroom, she noticed Edwin's dark hair sticking out over the back of the couch. The television wasn't turned on, which meant he had heard everything.

## 8. The Last Piece of the Puzzle

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Edwin didn't see her. She didn't say a word either.

Nora said that she would talk to George before deciding when to tell the children about Casey's plans. If Edwin told his siblings, the news would only be anticipated. She knew she should talk to them herself, especially Lizzie, but she was too exhausted to endure another session of tears. It was emotionally draining.

She brought some clothes, personal items, and school supplies to Emily's house the same day. Nora promised to call Dennis as soon as she spoke to George to explain the situation, and Casey knew she would convince her father that it wouldn't be ideal to let her live with him. So she needed to be quicker.

Dennis answered the phone on the fourth ring. "*Casey?*"

"Hi, Dad."

"*Is everything okay?*"

Casey looked around the guest room Emily had placed her in and sighed. "Yes. Mom will call you later and I wanted to let you in on the details before you decide to hear her out."

"*Oh, no,*" he said, his tone playful. "*Is this one of those times you're going to put us against each other?*"

She smiled a bit. "No, I would never do that! Okay, I *may* have done that before, but this is different."

"*What is it?*"

"I want to live with you."

Saying the sentence aloud to her dad seemed almost like a heresy. It sounded wrong. There was silence on the other end of the line, and Casey closed her eyes, embracing herself for his answer.

"*Sorry?"*

"I want to live with you, dad. If that's okay," she added, opening her eyes again.

"*Kiddo, you know I'd love it, but... why?*"

"I need some time away from home."

"*Is Liz coming too?*"

"No. No, it's just me."

"*Is it Derek?*"

The mere mention of his name made her grit her teeth. Even Dennis, who didn't know him very well, knew that Derek's only purpose on planet Earth was to unnerve her.

"It doesn't matter, I just need to go somewhere else now. I know mom's hurting," she added, feeling her voice falter, "and she's going to try to tell you not to let me go, but I can't stay here anymore. Please, dad."

*"Do you want to talk about it, sweetheart?"*

"No, not really. I'm at Emily's now, I'm staying here for a week. Mom made me promise to wait until she talked to you, but I just know she'll convince you to go against me."

*"Casey... I would absolutely love to have you here. But—"*

"Dad..."

*"But your life is in London. You have your school and your friends. College is just around the corner. Your mother will be devastated. What about Lizzie? I can't separate you. Have you told her yet?"*

Casey swallowed. She feared Lizzie wouldn't talk to her for a long time if she followed that plan. "No."

*"Okay, how about this? You take your time and think about it. If you're still sure you want to do this at the end of this week, talk to Lizzie and your step-siblings. This is your decision, but it affects their lives as well. They deserve to know."*

"I know. You're right."

*"Then think about it, okay? I'll be here, no matter what you decide. I love you, kid."*

"Love you too, dad."

As if listening to the conversation in the hallway, waiting for the right moment to come in, Emily opened the bedroom door when Casey hung up the phone. Closing the door behind her, she joined Casey on the bed, looking at her curiously. "So... what did he say?"

"That I should stay. But he would love it if I lived with him." The answer must have sounded as pitiful to Emily's ears as hers, because her friend looked down, clearly affected by the news. "What do you think?"

"Well, I can't tell you what to do. But I'd miss the hell out of you."

"Me too."

Emily looked at her promptly. "*Then why go at all?* It's what I said, isn't it?" She sighed, patting her forehead lightly, as if punishing herself. "Now you can't even look at Derek, so things are awkward at home and it's all my fault and he thinks he is—" Emily's eyes widened as she stopped mid-sentence, frantically looking for another thing to say. Casey frowned and she cleared her throat. "Look, I know things have been—"

"What were you saying?" Casey interrupted her.

"What?" she asked, although her expression of defeat was proof enough that she had heard her.

"About Derek, what were you saying?"

Emily dropped her face into her hands, cursing herself aloud. "I hate myself."

"What is it?"

She looked back at Casey and sighed. For the first time in her life, Emily Davis was stalling before gossiping; also for the first time in her life, Casey stared at her eagerly and impatiently, aching to hear what she had to say.

"He came up to me in Spanish class today and was acting all weird. It's always me who starts a conversation and he doesn't really engage. But he was trying to make small talk today, which was weird on its own. He asked me about homework and I thought he just wanted to copy mine, but he didn't seem very interested." Emily dropped her shoulders, staring at Casey with reluctance. "Until he asked me why we stopped going to school with him. I figured he was trying to ask about you without being too obvious. I tried to be as vague as possible and I think he was getting impatient. So he asked me why you were leaving."

Casey felt her chest filling up with warmth, a pleasant feeling spreading slowly under her skin, which startled her. She blinked, paralyzed for a few seconds. Derek certainly wouldn't try to start a conversation with Emily and ask about her life if he wasn't somewhat interested. *Worried, maybe?*

No, she would not fall into that abyss. If Derek was concerned, it was because the target of his pranks and insults would no longer be around, and Edwin was big enough not to accept being told around to make up for her absence.

"I don't even know how he knows, I tried to tell him that I didn't know anything and he obviously didn't believe it," she continued.

"Edwin must have told him," Casey muttered, lowering her eyes to play with her bracelet.

"I said I had no idea. He was quiet after that, but when class was over he found me in the hallway and asked if it was him." At Casey's skeptical look in her direction, Emily nodded. "He knows you're moving away because of him. But he thinks it's for another reason."

"Now *that* would make him happy."

"No, Casey. You didn't see him. He was genuinely worried. He tried to play it cool, but the minute I said you were determined to go, he got serious. Like, *frighteningly* serious. He just turned around and I didn't see him anymore after that. We had more classes together, but he didn't show up. Casey, *he cares.*"

Casey's heart pounded painfully in her chest and she felt naked, as if Emily could read each and every one of her thoughts. She knew Derek cared, despite everything he had said during their last fight. He wasn't heartless. But he would never swallow his pride and ask Emily about her, especially if he knew that she would probably tell her. That would make him the loser in their game.

"It bothers him that you're avoiding him."

"Because he has no one else to torment," she insisted. Perhaps if she became convinced of this, her mind would stop creating impossible theories. Or questioning her own feelings.

Emily let out a frustrated sound. “Are you really that clueless, Casey? The jokes, the insults from the start... he was trying to keep you away from him. He didn’t want to get attached, because in his mind you’re off limits. And you followed his lead.”

“Emily...”

*“Think about it. Do you really think Derek would have done half the things he did for you if he hated you? In what world would Derek give up his job for someone else? He went out of his way to warn you about that scumbag Scott. He called your dad when you were miserable. It sounds banal, but not to Derek. He doesn’t do nice things for people.”*

*Especially for the people he supposedly hates*, she added mentally. Suddenly every tender moment she had with Derek seemed to be proof of what Emily was saying. And yet, she refused to believe it. Because it made no sense. Because it was terrifying. Because it made everything even worse.

“He spent the whole night editing that video for your birthday, when you were at the hospital. Sam and I stayed to help, but we ended up falling asleep. I woke up when he was calling George to find out how you were doing. He kept calling every twenty minutes just to make sure you were okay. Do you really think Derek would do that for anyone?”

She already felt tears pricking her eyes. She shouldn’t cry because Derek had done things that any decent human being would do, but the thought of being important to him was indescribable. Now, everything he had done for her, however small, seemed endearing. She never doubted that Derek was a good person, she knew it from the start. He made mistakes and he was capable of driving her crazy, but she had always been aware of the good in him. She couldn’t picture her life without him in it anymore.

Derek had a big heart, but for some reason, he didn’t want people to know it. But somehow, in the middle of the chaos they had been living in, he had accidentally let her peek into his soul and find a part of him that he tried to hide so vehemently. It showed whenever he let his guard down, or when he let her help him with song lyrics for his band, or when he genuinely smiled at her when they were having a conversation without trying to pick up a fight. It showed when he stood up for her and he touched her arm with softness and gave her his jacket to take her home. It showed when he cast her that last look before going into his room that same night.

It was beautiful and almost sacred. She almost felt like it only belonged to her, for she grew to love it.

“No,” she whispered, more to herself than to Emily, as it all fell into place. Like a puzzle which last piece had been hidden the entire time. Casey had finally found it.

*I’m in love with Derek.*

Before she could even begin to process the thought, Emily’s arms were already around her. “Hey, hey, it’s fine.”

But it wasn’t fine. Because it wasn’t just the fact that she allowed herself to develop feelings for the person she was supposed to only barely tolerate, but that he was also her stepbrother. Because they lived together, because their parents were married, because they had step-siblings and her feelings weren’t reciprocal.

“What’s wrong with me?”

“No,” Emily practically chided her. “You’re not doing that to yourself. There’s nothing wrong with you. This isn’t wrong or whatever your head’s trying to tell you, I promise.”

Emily’s soft tone was soothing, but not enough. Casey’s hands were shaking and her heart slammed loudly against her chest.

“Em, I’m scared,” she whispered, feeling Emily’s arms tighten around her.

“I know, Case. I know.”

## 9. Unwelcome Guests

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She didn't want to do it *at all*. But Emily had been her rock during the past few days and she wanted to attend Ralph's party — the one Casey would have completely forgotten if it wasn't for her friend constantly reminding her about it after Sheldon texted her saying he would be back in town for a week and also attend the party. Although Casey had insisted that she would be fine alone at the house, Emily didn't feel comfortable leaving her there to sink into her anxiety after her latest discoveries.

It hadn't been easy. During the day, she had Emily and school. Since the day she provisionally moved into the Davis' guest room, Emily hadn't even *mentioned* Derek's name, even though she was always trying to talk about him subtly, as if expecting Casey to pick up on it and finally open up. But when nighttime came and she was left alone with her thoughts, it would all come crashing down in six words. *I am in love with him.*

Repeating it like a mantra didn't make it seem any realer, but the way her heart raced whenever she thought about Derek did. And the more she dove into those new feelings, the more she found reasons to believe it was undeniable. It didn't mean she fully accepted it. Maybe she never would.

She hadn't seen Derek anymore, except for the few classes they had together — that is, when he *actually* showed up. Whenever he did, he made no visual contact, and even though Casey told herself it was better that way, she hated him for not reaching out. Maybe he didn't care, after all. A painful feeling twisted her insides. *It's like you actually want me to care.* She couldn't believe how true those words were now.

"Em, I don't think this is a good idea," she tried one last time, checking her makeup in the mirror. Her dark circles were not completely covered up, but they were infinitely better than in the morning. Casey didn't know what it meant to have a good night's sleep anymore.

Emily approached her, straightening the skirt of her black strapless dress. "Sam promised me Derek wouldn't be there, okay? He took an extra shift at work or something."

Casey frowned. Derek would never pass the opportunity to go to a party. She no longer knew whether she would be less inclined to go to Ralph's if Derek was there or if he wasn't.

Emily hurried her and they drove out with Mr. Davis' car. Ralph's house was only two blocks away, and the sound of the music coming from the place could already be heard on the first corner they turned. Emily had to park the car a few meters away, as most of the guests were already there. A few people were chatting in the garden with plastic cups in their hands.

"Hey, girls, you look great!" Sam greeted them excitedly as they walked through the front door. He had a bottle of beer in his hands.

"Thanks, Sam," Casey smiled faintly. "Shouldn't Ralph be doing this, though?" she asked, motioning to him.

"I'm not sure Ralph even knows *he's* the host," he replied, chuckling. "But come in, there are snacks and drinks on that table and near the pool."

They nodded readily and Sam gestured for them to blend in with people. Casey elbowed her way among the sea of people dancing to the beat of pop music. Emily quickly spotted Sheldon from afar and Casey encouraged her to join him as she stood next to the snack table. If she kept to herself in the corner, everything would be fine.

She saw Noel some time later, who approached to greet her. They talked animatedly for a long time, lamenting that they hadn't been able to meet as much during that year. Noel was still writing poetry, was nearly finishing writing a novel, and was dating a girl named Tara. Casey was happy for him, and when Tara came to steal him for a dance — or better yet, a completely uncoordinated swaying of bodies, that still made Noel look like the happiest person on the planet — she couldn't help but think about what Emily had told her once.

Noel really was the image of the perfect boy she had built in her mind. But if the conclusions she had drawn over the last few days had proven anything to her, it was that her mind didn't match her heart, and no matter what she told herself, a boy like Noel could never be the perfect match for her. Casey wanted someone to challenge her, to show her a different side of life, and to whom she could show a new perspective every day. Someone exciting.

She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes, groaning softly. *Not now.* Derek had the surreal ability to ruin her days without even being around.

"Hey."

Casey snapped her eyes open to stare at her company. Truman was smiling down at her, two bottles of beer in his hands, handing one out to her. Casey shook her head in denial and he shrugged, leaving the bottle on the table next to them.

"So... you've been kind of M.I.A."

"Yeah," she answered promptly, reaching for the bottle of beer she had rejected just seconds ago. Truman frowned, but seemed amused by her action. "Finals and all that."

Casey had never had a drop of alcohol in her life, except for a few sips of champagne in the New Years or special occasions. She didn't know how her body would react to the drink, but when she realized that anxiety was about to take over her, she chose to try it. Taking a big gulp, she scowled at the bitter taste.

"I figured."

Casey nodded and brought the bottle to her mouth again, forcing the cold liquid down her throat, trying to suppress another grimace.

"Casey?"

"Hmm?" She lowered the bottle, looking at him. Maybe she had overestimated her resistance to alcohol, because she already felt lightheaded.

"Are you sure you should be drinking beer? You don't look like someone who... well, *drunks*. It may be a bit much for you."

"You're right," she agreed, though the pressure of Truman's eyes on her had made her counteract her own words when she emptied the bottle in one last gulp. Nora would be so disappointed to see her now. She was disappointed in herself. *Stupid party, stupid Truman, stupid Derek and his damn smirk and his ability to make her want to rip her hair out and get drunk at a party she didn't even want to be at.*

"Come with me," Truman offered, setting his own bottle on the table and reaching for Casey.

She looked at his hand briefly, shaking her head. The last thing she wanted at that moment was to talk to Truman when she wasn't totally sober. "I'm okay."

"Let's go outside."

"No."

If she was being honest, she just wanted him to go away and let her breathe. Maybe find a safe place where she could lie down and wait for Emily to find her so they could go home. This was obviously a mistake and she should have listened to her intuition. The loud noise of the music and the side conversations were making her nauseous. Or maybe it was the alcohol.

"You seem a little tipsy already. Are you seeing two of me?" Truman asked, a playful smile on his face.

"I'm pretty sure that's not how beer works, Truman."

He laughed, approaching her. There was something invasive about it and Casey stepped back instinctively. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why are you acting weird around me?"

"I'm just... confused."

"Why?"

Casey sighed. "You're cute and you're cool. And I think you know that. Sometimes you're nice."

Truman tilted his head. "Um... thanks?"

"But I don't think I *like* like you. Like, I like you, but I don't *like* like you. You know?" Apparently, a bottle of beer could alter her IQ as well. Casey laughed at herself, entertained by her own lack of fluency in her own language. But Truman didn't seem as pleased.

"So why did you agree to go out with me?"

Casey's smile faded slowly; Truman's face was unreadable, but his playful countenance was long gone now. "You said we were going out as friends."

"Come on, you're not *that* naive, Casey."

She narrowed her eyes, trying to focus his face. Suddenly she became extremely self-conscious of their position and felt cornered; Truman was facing her and the only thing behind her was a wall. Casey glanced over his shoulder, finding a crowd of teenagers too

invested in their own dance moves and making-out to notice them in the corner of the living room. She tried to ward off the panic that was gradually rising inside her. Maybe she was reading too much into it and Truman was simply trying to get her full attention.

"I, uh... I need to go to the bathroom," she said, stepping aside and feeling her body freeze as he blocked her way with his arm. Casey looked at him, swallowing. There were shadows in his eyes, which made her feel unsafe and scared. He didn't look like the same boy who had shared childhood stories with her just a week before.

Casey tried to smile and gripped his forearm, attempting to push him away, but Truman was stronger. He softened his gaze on her face and smiled as if nothing had happened, gripping her arms with exaggerated strength. "Come on, Casey. You just need to give me a chance." His hands then found her waist and he pressed her body to his, causing her heart to jump unsteadily inside her chest in fear.

Fighting the apprehension and repulsion building inside her, Casey shook her head. "Stop it, Truman. *Please*," she said more desperately this time, pushing his hands away from her body. Truman brought his face close to hers, causing Casey to pull back and slam her back against the wall. She gritted her teeth in pain and lifted her chin to scowl at him. "*I told you to stop.*"

"You haven't even tried it," he replied melodically, which just made the situation even scarier. She could already feel his breath on her skin, reminding her that he was invading her personal space, that she didn't want him so close, that she should be respected. She turned her head to the side when he leaned in to kiss her, which made his lips touch her cheek. It was nauseating. She wanted to cry.

"*Let go of me, Truman*," she raised her voice, hoping someone would hear her over the loud music.

He raised his hands to hold her face and forced her to look at him. She could feel her entire body trembling in fear. "*You* need to let go a bit. You can't just tease me and not let me enjoy it, you know?" He leaned forward again, and Casey clenched her fists.

"No." In an adrenaline rush, she tried to push him as hard as she could, and was surprised at her strength when he stumbled backwards. However, it took her a moment to register the fact that it hadn't been her strength, if not someone else's hands violently pulling Truman away from her.

*Derek.*

## 10. Musk and Wood

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Casey's head was spinning and it wasn't the alcohol.

Her heart was pounding so hard against her ribs that she feared they would break at any moment as she watched Derek pull Truman by the collar of his shirt. She had never seen Derek lose his temper or get into a physical fight; she didn't know what reaction to expect from him. His face was red, contorted in what she could only think to be fury. When Truman turned to him, his face was the exact reflection of Derek's.

"You don't know how to take a no, do you?" Derek spat the words, approaching Truman in an attempt to intimidate him. They were about the same height, and when Truman puffed out his chest to face him, their noses were only centimeters apart.

Her heart nearly stopped, anticipating what would happen next. She really didn't want to be the cause of a fight, let alone be the main focus of the party; and both of those things were happening right then. The music had been turned down and people were beginning to notice the commotion in Ralph's living room.

"I don't remember calling you here, Venturi." Truman retorted, roughly pushing Derek away by his shoulders. Casey gasped as he staggered, listening to the reaction of the people around her. At her side, two boys were laughing, enjoying the privileged view of the argument unfolding before them.

Casey wished someone would move. She looked around, desperately searching for any familiar face to come and drag Derek outside of that room before something worse happened, but she didn't recognize anyone. Or maybe it was just her nerves, preventing her from naming faces she definitely knew from school.

She would have done it herself if she had been able to find her voice or make her legs work, but she was paralyzed. So she had to watch as Derek lunged forward, returning the aggression, aggressively pushing Truman by the chest. His eyes were dark now, filled with a hate that didn't belong there.

"I don't want to fight you, Truman." By the restrained tone of his voice, Casey knew he was trying to refrain from giving in to his impulses, which were *clearly* telling him to fight the other boy.

Truman straightened up and presumptuously marched up to Derek, making sure to look him in the eyes before speaking again. "Because you're a little pussy?"

The challenge unleashed a series of gasps and incredulous sounds from the crowd around them, including Casey. Derek's jaw tightened, but he remained still, holding Truman's murderous gaze. She silently prayed that he didn't take Truman up on the stupid challenge; she knew he was strong enough to put up a fight, but so was Truman, and the prospect of Derek getting hurt was frightening.

"No, because I'm better than that. You're not worth it. A piece of shit like you won't learn anything from a broken nose, as much as I'd love to break it for you."

She clearly remembered telling Derek that Truman was infinitely better than him. If she could take back those words now, she would do it as many times as necessary. At least until Derek believed her. All her assumptions about Truman fell apart that night, decimating every good feeling she had about him. By contrast, all her negative beliefs about Derek — the ones that seemed so distant now — became but a faded memory, overshadowed by what he was standing for at that moment.

Truman scoffed, jabbing a finger into Derek's chest. "What? Don't take it out on me, man. It's not my fault you can't screw your sister."

Casey noticed the exact moment when all the attentive spectators turned their eyes on her, little by little, making her feel humiliated. She was certain her expression denoted the feeling of complete and utter shame. A series of "oh, my God" and "what?" filled the place, and all Casey could see through her blinding tears was Derek's face contorting in wrath.

"*You son-of-a-bitch,*" he snapped, and there was so much hatred in his voice that Casey flinched. She watched Derek swing his arm and clench his fist, too quickly for Truman to deflect before it connected to his face with an agonizing sound of something breaking. Blood began to drip from Truman's nose, seconds before Sam and Ralph finally appeared, each pulling the boys away from each other with some difficulty. There were gasps and even giggles among the crowd while both boys resisted.

They were still staring at each other, panting, veins visible on their foreheads even from a distance. Truman slid the back of his hand under his nose, staining his skin with the dark red liquid. Casey felt the tears wetting her cheeks and lowered her head in a failed attempt to go unnoticed before rushing to the nearest bathroom.

She closed the door and ran to the sink, gripping its edges in order to keep her balance. She looked at her own reflection in the mirror. Her eyes were bloodshot; a few strands of hair had stuck to her neck from sweat. She sobbed quietly as she vigorously rubbed her cheek, where Truman's lips had touched her, in an attempt to get rid of any possible traces of him still left on her.

Looking down, she noticed that there were reddish marks on her right arm. At some point, while she was trying to escape him, Truman must have hurt her. She couldn't remember. Maybe it was the adrenaline, but all she could remember was the way she felt small and dirty and terrified when he wouldn't listen to her requests to let her go.

*I shouldn't have come*, was all her mind echoed, like a mantra that didn't help at all. The mental exhaustion she felt was painful; all she wanted was to lie on the cold bathroom floor and stay there until the next day. *This just happened*, she told herself. *This just happened. This just happened.* It was a way to keep her grounded to reality, but it seemed so twisted that she couldn't believe it.

She heard voices on the other side of the door and stared at it, trying to remember if she had locked it. She got her answer two seconds later, when the door swung open for a disturbed Derek. He closed it shut and leaned against it, directing his gaze towards her. His eyes were darker than normal, the result of his exasperation towards Truman, and he was

visibly trying to calm his breathing. Casey couldn't bear to look at him for long. She stepped away from the sink and turned her back to Derek, wiping her face with her hands. The silence was uncomfortable and grim, but it seemed to match the situation. There was nothing both of them could say to make it better.

"Casey..." Derek began, his voice low and soft.

She felt her body tense up involuntarily; it had been a long time since he had addressed her — or since she had even heard his voice, for that matter. Everything she had been trying to ignore during the past few days came back at once, overpowering any other feeling or thought. How was it possible that she was feeling so unsafe just minutes before, and now that Derek was there, she could only feel the sense of security that emanated from him? When did she let that happen?

"Casey," he tried again. "Are you okay?"

It seemed like a stupid question, and she was sure he thought the same. But she also knew that Derek couldn't handle tears, let alone traumatic episodes. He had no idea how to approach her and she had no idea how to answer that question. She was hurt, mostly mentally, but it could be worse. She had heard stories about girls who were taken advantage of at parties like that one. She just never imagined she could be one of them.

"I guess."

"Do you... want me to leave?"

"No." The answer slipped out of her tongue so quickly that it startled her.

Casey didn't know why Derek was helping her or why he was being so gentle, but she didn't want it to stop. She didn't want him to burst that bubble he himself had created in order to protect her and leave her alone. She didn't want to lose *that* Derek, as selfish as it sounded in her own head.

"I, uh..." She could hear him swallowing across the bathroom. Apparently the party was over, as the music hadn't been turned on again. "I don't know what the protocol is here." He sounded helpless, more vulnerable than she had ever seen him in her life.

*Welcome to the club*, she thought humorlessly.

"Did he... do something to you? Did he hurt you?"

Instinctively, she looked down at her arm, where Truman's fingerprints had been temporarily tattooed. Her throat was hurting from the tears she was keeping. "No."

When he said nothing, Casey sighed. Reluctantly, she turned to him and as their eyes met, she noticed that he looked calmer. His eyes were back to its normal shade of hazel now, even though they seemed softer than she remembered.

"I thought you were supposed to be working."

Derek shook his head. "I left earlier."

She dropped her gaze to his right hand, parallel to his body. It was still loosely curled into a fist, a light shade of red coloring the skin around his knuckles.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

He kitted his eyebrows in what she thought to be him not expecting her to consider his welfare. He lifted his hand and stared at it for a few seconds before letting it drop to his side again. "Yeah. It's nothing."

She nodded, relieved. The images of what happened just minutes ago were still too fresh in her memory, and she crossed her arms, as if the act might shield her from her own thoughts. Derek's eyes followed the movement and she saw him instantly move away from the door to meet her. Casey took a step back, unsure of what he was doing, but realized what had caught his attention when she saw he was looking at her arm.

He stopped in front of her, holding her forearm and gently pulling it to check the newly acquired bruise on her skin. She wasn't used to being touched by him, much less so tenderly. The mere brush of his fingers on her skin made her breathless for a moment and Casey lifted her head to meet his eyes. He didn't look up, though.

"Was it him?" he asked firmly.

"I hadn't noticed it."

He subtly shook his head and bit the inside of his cheek. She could see his chest rising and falling rapidly, but his breathing sounded calm, as if he was holding back. Slowly, she felt Derek rub his thumb over her bruise and looked down at where their skins touched. It didn't hurt; she could almost feel her skin going numb in the most pleasant way. For a moment, she considered touching his hand, but stopped herself for fear of breaking that moment. She wanted to live in that exact moment for as long as she could. So her eyes just kept following the invisible circles his finger was drawing over her skin; it was soothing and instigating, a perfect paradox.

"I'm sorry," he said, so quietly that Casey wondered if she had imagined it.

She didn't know what he was apologizing for, but somehow it seemed like it was for everything. For the situation Truman had put her in, for the fight Derek had caused, for the bruise on her skin. She felt those words in her soul and kept them to herself.

"Is he...?"

"The guys got him out of the house," Derek confirmed.

"Well, you were right," she admitted, adding a humorless chuckle.

Derek didn't reply and when his finger stopped moving over her arm, Casey lifted her head only to find his eyes already watching her intently. Her stomach seemed to be full of catatonic butterflies, trying to find a nonexistent way out. With each passing second of silence, Casey felt more powerless. It was as if he was capable of weakening her, without her having a say in it.

His hand was still holding her arm; the warmth from his skin was sending waves of heat through her body. Innocent touches and furtive looks always made her flush, it happened whenever she had a crush on a guy. She remembered feeling butterflies and feeling excited with her ex-boyfriends, but whatever she was feeling right now, didn't compare to any of that. She had never craved someone else's touch it was air, never felt compelled to ignore the rest

of the world when she was alone with them, never felt helpless and overwhelmed and scared at the same time.

She had never fallen in love before.

Maybe she shouldn't be thinking about it when she was staring at the subject of her thoughts, but it was impossible to ignore it any longer. Derek blinked; he looked concentrated, like he was trying to read her mind. She wished she could spare him time and simply tell him, but it wasn't as easy. She knew she would never be able to say the words out loud, and the idea of living with that terrifying secret was desolating.

"I..." she began, and Derek subtly moved his head forward, eager to hear the rest. There was a glimmer in his eyes, a riveting touch of curiosity and expectation that added to their beauty.

"What?"

*I am in love with you. "I want to go home."*

He blinked again, seeming to have been pulled out of a trance. "Oh." Whatever he was expecting her to say, it wasn't that. He quickly straightened his body and released Casey's arm. Her skin felt immediately cold without his touch. "Okay, let's go."

"No. I came with Emily."

"I think she drank a little."

Casey nodded and Derek jerked his chin, indicating that they left the bathroom. As they walked side by side, Casey realized that most people had already left the party.

"Show's over," Derek announced to the few curious guests that were still there, who looked away immediately.

They made their way out of the house and Casey welcomed the light breeze that touched her skin as she observed a few cars leaving the street, away from that disastrous party that she had managed to ruin. *Truman ruined it*, she corrected herself, with a soft sniff. Why was it so easy to blame herself for what others did? She wouldn't let what he had said get into her head; she knew she didn't owe Truman anything for hanging out with him. She stole a glance at Derek, who was patiently accompanying her slow steps to the sidewalk, lost in his own thoughts.

"Casey!" Emily's voice interrupted whatever she was about to say and she whirled around to see her friend running towards her. Emily hugged her tightly, her expression worried as she released her. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"I'm okay, Em."

Sheldon, Sam and Ralph followed right behind; the latter carrying what looked like a cookie jar. Sam approached them, looking between Casey and Derek with concern.

"Did you calm down?" he asked Derek. "Do you need me to drive you guys back?"

"Nah, I'm fine."

"Dude, you guys really scared me there for a second," Ralph said, placing a hand to his chest. "I thought it was a joke until Sam appeared out of thin air, no kidding, and practically pushed me to stop the whole thing."

Casey wondered who, in their right mind, would think that the terrifying scene she had witnessed that night was only a joke, but thought the only possible answer was Ralph.

"I was in the bathroom when I heard the music stop." Sam's eyes flickered to hers and he put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Casey. He wasn't even supposed to be here, I don't know how he got past me."

"Actually, I let him in when you were helping the guys with the drinks," Ralph explained, receiving death stares from his friends. "I didn't know he wasn't invited."

Sheldon looked at him with skepticism. "This was *your* party."

"Well, that's *Ralph* you're talking about," Derek said, and there was a hint of accusation in his tone.

Ralph looked at his friend apologetically and then back at Casey. "I brought this for you," he said, handing her the cookie jar. "My mom made them this morning, they're so good, dude. I hope you like it."

Casey smiled faintly, touched by Ralph's gesture, who truly believed a cookie jar would make everything better. "Thanks, Ralph."

"We better go home," Emily said.

"I don't think you should drive right now," Derek said. "You can come with us. I can come back tomorrow and drive your car back home."

"Maybe I can take Emily home and then get a cab from there," Sheldon suggested.

Everyone nodded in agreement and the small group dispersed quickly. Derek pointed to his left, where he had parked the Prince at a considerable distance, and rested his hand on Casey's exposed back to lead her towards the car. She felt a shiver run down her spine, which he attributed to the cold.

"My jacket's in the car," he said.

Casey didn't correct him. She wasn't cold; on the contrary, the heat had spread through her body like a wildfire, and it was mainly because of him. It wasn't just the fact that he was touching her, but the mere notion that he was right there, by her side, willing to offer her his time and his support. But when she sat in the passenger's seat and Derek reached for his leather jacket in the backseat to offer it to her, she couldn't refuse.

"Thanks," she murmured, tucking her arms inside the sleeves of the jacket that was slightly too big for her body. Casey hugged herself, sinking her nose into the fabric. She reckoned — and secretly hoped — that his scent, a mixture of musk and wood, would linger on her when she took the jacket off.

The ride was so short that she didn't have time to rewind the images of the party, nor break the silence that Derek let slip in between them so comfortably. He also didn't ask if she would sleep at home when he parked the car in the garage, but he must have assumed so, because he

simply opened the kitchen door and waited for her to follow him in. The house was dark and Casey instantly wondered what time it was. She followed Derek's careful footsteps up the stairs, clinging to his jacket, though she could already feel the first drop of sweat running down her back. She knew she would have to give it back to him, but she didn't want to let go of it just yet. It was like having access to something that only belonged to him, something he would never let anyone else have.

Derek opened her bedroom door for her to pass, still in silence. She walked to the center of the room and turned to him, who was standing awkwardly by the door, watching her.

"So..." He scratched the back of his neck and put a hand on the doorknob. "Good night."

"Derek," she called instinctively, before he could turn to leave. He met her gaze curiously, his hand still steady on the doorknob.

There were so many things she wanted to say to him, but none seemed appropriate for the moment. The fact that they were in her room and the only source of illumination was the light coming from the lamps in the hall didn't make it any less difficult. She reluctantly removed his jacket and walked over to him to return it. Derek held her gaze for a few more seconds before grabbing his jacket and nodding.

Casey crossed her arms, lightly scratching the inside of her elbows nervously. "You knew he..." she started, causing him to look back at her. "Is that why you were getting into fights with him?"

His eyes dropped to the floor, his fingers fidgeting with the zipper of his jacket. "No, that was... I just thought he was messing with you. And other girls," he added quickly. Then, meeting her eyes again, he clenched his jaw. "If I'd known he'd do something like that, I wouldn't... I'd probably have been kicked out of school for punching his fucking face a long time ago."

Okay. So, he picked up a fight with Truman for her. And other girls. But *mostly* for her.

She told herself it would be a lot easier if they weren't alone in her room after midnight, but the truth was that there would never be an ideal place or time to hear him saying that. How was she supposed to react to him being so soft when she was so aware of her own feelings? If anything, the way he had cared for her that night had maximized everything and Casey wasn't sure she would be able to deal with that. The idea of moving out of the house seemed even more reasonable now. And she hated it.

"You know... I didn't mean any of that, right?" she added softly, hoping he would understand what she meant without her having to relive their last arguments. She had insulted him and compared him to Truman and there was nothing she could do to take those words back. "I'm so sorry, Derek. I am."

He looked suddenly uncomfortable. They almost never got to that part, the genuine apology. Whenever one of them was wrong, they simply teased the other until it stopped being funny; or at the very least, they moved on without acknowledging it. But she wouldn't be able to forgive herself if she didn't apologize now.

"It's fine, Casey."

"It's not. I was wrong. You're nothing like him."

“Told ya,” he countered, but instead of the usual pretentious tone, his voice was an attempt at soft, almost taciturn humor. She risked a humorless smile and Derek did the same, glancing at the jacket the next second, folding it properly over his arm.

She frowned at the behavior. Derek’s clothes were always rumpled from his lack of care for them, but now his concentration seemed to be fully addressed at his jacket. As if he was using it to ease the tension, although it would be much easier for him to simply leave. *Maybe he doesn’t want to leave*, a tiny voice whispered in the back of her head. *Shut up*, she snapped back. But she knew she wouldn’t mind if they remained that way for the rest of the night, simply talking or enjoying the silence until sleepiness came over them.

“Well, I’m... going to bed,” he said suddenly, looking at her. It seemed like he was asking for her approval. Casey seriously considered asking him to stay just a little longer, but she quickly banished the intrusive thought and only nodded. Derek hesitated before stepping towards the hallway.

“Thank you,” she said after him.

Derek nodded again, as if they were partners talking about the profitability of their company. He looked at his bedroom door and then at her, twice. His reluctance was evident and Casey noticed he was struggling with himself not to say whatever was on his mind.

“What is it?” she asked, carefully.

“Nothing.”

“You sure?”

His eyes lingered on her a little longer than normal before he replied. “Yeah.”

Unconvinced, she chose not to insist. “Okay.”

“Good night.”

“Good night, Derek.”

He tapped his knuckles lightly on the door frame three times and made his way to his bedroom, taking one last look at her before going in. Her stomach flipped. Casey closed her door quietly, welcoming the darkness of her room for a few seconds before taking off her shoes and lying on the bed, wondering what could be troubling him. She reckoned the events of that night had rattled him just as it did her; if not for the fight with Truman, for the way he behaved around her. She didn’t know if he had stepped up out of an odd feeling of protectiveness over her, but whatever his motives were, he was truly affected. Yet he didn’t stop there. He went after her and checked up on her; he validated her feelings and listened; he took her home and truly cared. He cared.

*You love him and he only cares.* It should hurt — and it did. But it was also more than what she expected.

She sighed and turned her face partially to the side, inhaling.

Her hair smelled of musk and wood.

## 11. Us

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Casey woke up to an annoying headache and the feeling that she had slept a little too much. Blinking to get used to the sunlight streaming through her bedroom curtains, she confirmed her suspicions as she looked at the clock. It was past ten in the morning.

She stood up promptly, still wondering why on earth she had drank the night before, because now she was almost sure she would never drink another drop of alcohol again. As she did her personal hygiene, memories of the night before flooded her, bringing along the different sensations she had experienced. She didn't want to think about the fear that initiated everything, but rather the safety and comfort Derek had offered her after it.

Nothing felt real; it all seemed to be only a nightmare her mind had fabricated. Truman turned out to be an abuser, a despicable human being she regretted meeting. And although he hadn't done anything worse to her, she had to scrub her skin in the shower until it hurt in order to make sure his fingerprints weren't on her body anymore. Only they were still in her memory and no amount of water could cleanse her mind from what she had been put through.

Casey put Emily's borrowed dress and shoes in a bag and exchanged her pajamas for a shirt and jeans. She stopped in front of the door for a second and took a deep breath, anticipating her family's overreaction to when they saw her at home. But as she walked down the hall, there was nothing but silence.

*That's weird*, she thought. Her family was usually in the middle of their lighthearted yelling and running around before ten in the morning — except for Derek, who didn't get out of bed until two in the afternoon on Saturdays, unless he had to work.

She went downstairs looking around, searching for anyone. "Hello?"

Entering the kitchen, she frowned at the empty place. In a way, the absence of her family brought her instant relief and she sighed, relaxing her body. Her stomach was grumbling and Casey decided to have a quick breakfast before her family returned from wherever they were now. She opened the fridge and grabbed the almond milk, placing it on the counter. Then, she went to the cupboard, seeking for her favorite cereal box. That was when someone walked through the backdoor.

Casey took a deep breath again, embracing herself for the series of questions she would receive from the visitor. But then she saw it was Derek. He closed the door and took his shirt off, placing it into one of the laundry baskets that were lying next to the washing machine. Obviously, he hadn't noticed her there.

Her eyes betrayed her before she could have a say in it, sliding to the muscles on his back and arms. In the three years they had lived together, she had only seen him shirtless a few times, usually during the summer. But only now did she notice how different his body was, which made her wonder if his extra hockey practices had been responsible for the change.

Derek whirled around, a crease on his forehead, clearly looking for something in the drawers on the opposite side. His head snapped up the moment he noticed her presence and

Casey was forced to meet his eyes, blushing furiously. That was a sure sign that she shouldn't be admiring him from afar. If Derek noticed it, he didn't mention it, though.

"I, uh... thought you w-were sleeping," she sputtered, cursing at herself mentally.

Derek looked down at the drawers again and opened one of them. She couldn't see his expression from where she was standing. "Nope." He didn't sound annoyed, but didn't sound pleased with the conversation either.

Casey didn't know how to approach him. The previous night had set some sort of change in their relationship, or so she thought. He didn't only stand up for her, but was also willing to talk and comfort her. She could swear that her arm was still tingling where his finger had stroked her skin. It might have been naive of her to believe that they would be closer after that, but she hadn't realized he would be even more distant than usual.

"Um... what are you doing?" she asked, cautiously.

Derek grabbed a small object from the drawer he had been inspecting for too long and stared at her. "Dad told me to fix the cabinet in the garage."

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "And you're *actually* doing it?"

"I was the one who broke it."

"And George threatened to take the car from you?"

"Bingo."

She gave him a weak smile and immediately looked away as Derek pulled back far enough from the drawers to give her a full view of his body. She didn't need to deal with that after waking up; she went back to inspecting the cupboard, finding only Marti's favorite cereal, which was too sweet for her taste.

"We ran out of your cereal," Derek said, and she closed the cupboard in time to see him grabbing the cookie jar Ralph had given her the night before, which had been placed on top of a shelf next to the door. She had forgotten them in their car. "But I found this in the backseat. They're pretty good."

"De-rek, you ate them?" she scolded, which delighted him. Derek smirked and everything seemed to be back to normal for a second. She would rather have him being his presumptuous usual self than so out of reach. Reaching for the jar, she unscrewed the lid and set it on the counter next to the milk. "That'll do, I'm *starving*."

She grabbed a glass and poured some milk in it, allowing herself to be surprised when she turned around to find Derek still standing in the same spot, his gaze closely fixed on her. Feeling suddenly self-conscious, Casey cleared her throat. "So... where's everyone?"

He glanced sideways briefly, which, according to her years of experience living with him, was his tell. It didn't happen often, but she recognized the signs. He was straying from the truth. "They left early in the morning."

"Where did they go?"

He huffed. "I don't know, Casey. I don't keep track of our family."

She flinched slightly, feeling the known hint of resentment bubbling inside her. Why was he acting like *she* was being petulant when *he* was the one still standing in the kitchen, as though he wanted to continue the conversation? They were right back to square one again. Whenever she thought they made progress, Derek always stepped back.

*What were you expecting, you idiot? It's Derek.* She was stupid enough to fall in love with him, it wasn't a surprise that she would be stupid enough to expect him to be the Derek she had seen just a couple of hours ago. She would never have that again.

Casey couldn't hide her disappointment, so she shifted her gaze to the counter, silently waiting for him to go away. Yet, he stayed. She could feel his eyes burning her in some sort of daunting challenge. If he was really bothered, why didn't he just leave?

"I'm just going to finish this and be on my way," she affirmed, still not bothering to look at him; she hated the way she felt too emotionally influenced by the indifference he was showing.

Her heart reacted immediately when he took a step forward, proceeding to walk towards the counter. He stood on the other side of it, facing her.

"Why are you leaving?" he asked, tersely.

Casey didn't have time to hesitate before looking up at him. There was no way to identify the sentiment behind his voice, but he was serious and there was a somberness to his eyes. She didn't have an answer, because saying '*you*' certainly wouldn't work without bringing a series of questions she couldn't bear to be asked right now. Or ever.

"Edwin told me," he explained.

"I figured."

His Adam's apple bobbed and she couldn't help but feel it was a materialization of him swallowing his own pride to ask her that question. *It must be hard for him*, she thought, *to show that it bothers him.* Maybe that was why he was trying to sound so distant. Derek didn't want her to know; he didn't want her to think she was special because he had faced Truman for her.

He hesitated before walking around the counter to stand only a few centimeters away from her; Casey's breath hitched as she raised her eyes to him.

"I heard Nora call your dad. You're going to live with him?"

"Yes."

"He lives pretty far."

She shook her head. "He's coming to Ottawa next week."

"You wouldn't see Liz as much," he insisted.

"No."

"Or Marti. Or Edwin," he continued, and she wondered if his insistence was truly his inability to hide how much her absence really affected him showing. And the thought of that being true scared her. His eyes squinted at her, both his countenance and tone almost

resentful. "They'll be mad at you. Nora's been crying. Lizzie and Marti don't know; I told Ed not to tell them, because you should be the one doing that. But you *didn't* do it. You didn't tell *any* of us. What do you think it's going to happen when they find out?"

Casey felt tears welling in her eyes and her face heating up in a mix of anger and shame. "Are you trying to make me feel guilty? I thought you'd be the first one encouraging me to stay as far away from you as possible."

Derek furrowed his eyebrows and for an instant, he looked hurt. "I'm just telling you what's going on at home without you."

"Why are you acting like this? You're like a completely different person now."

Something flickered in his eyes. "Look, just because I was nice to you once, it doesn't mean we're friends. Don't expect things from me, Casey. You'll just get disappointed."

"What, because you don't want me to *know that you care?*"

"*I don't!*"

"*Then why does it matter if I'm leaving?*"

She hadn't realized they were shouting up until that moment, which wouldn't be so surprising considering the fact that all their fights ended like this. But this one was different. Now she wasn't angry at him, but at *herself* for letting him get under her skin, for wanting him to care just as much as she did, for knowing that her own feelings could never result in more than hidden emotions and pretending.

He stared at the counter, escaping her inquiring eyes. "Because your family loves you."

Maybe she was reading too much into it, but the way his voice wavered when he said the word '*love*' made her stomach tie into knots. Her heart was beating so fast that it was all she could hear, a melody created from that equally pleasant and frightening sensation that Derek's body was pulling her to him without even touching her.

"I love you too," she whispered, and although the sentence could be taken as a simple response to his accusation, that she loved her family just as much, Casey feared the real meaning she had given it. She knew she loved him now. But he didn't. And he wasn't supposed to.

His eyes were back on her in a second, silently questioning her words. He was clearly taken aback by them.

"You guys are my family," she fixed it, tensely. "You know that. I just need—"

"What?"

Casey closed her eyes for a moment, frustrated, and ran the palms of her hands across her face.

"*Why* are you leaving, Casey?"

She looked at him again. "*Why does it matter?*"

*“Because,” he fumed, “I don’t understand why you would leave us— your family to live with your dad all of a sudden.”*

The words came out abruptly, marred with frustration, but she didn’t fail to notice the ‘us’ he almost let slip. And maybe he had realized the same, because the fervor in his eyes made it suddenly hard for her lungs to work.

Now, his breathing was all she could hear. The tension returned like a hurricane, destroying every barrier she had tried to build to protect herself. Casey watched as his eyes inadvertently flickered to her lips and he tilted his head forward just a millimeter before retreating. She felt herself doing the same thing, as if he had some kind of magnetism she couldn’t resist. Her heart seemed to drop to her feet for a brief moment.

Derek didn’t pull away, and she was certain that if he didn’t do it soon, she wouldn’t be able to be in control of her own body anymore. She could feel it slipping away from her grasp, like trying to catch water with her hands. Her chest ached, longing for him, his touch, the heat that seemed to irradiate from his body.

His eyes returned to hers and he moved even closer. He looked slightly startled, possibly fearing what was happening as he tested a new limit. He watched her reaction warily and she reckoned he was waiting for her to stop him. She knew she should, but she couldn’t stop thinking about what it would be like to just let it happen.

Derek took another step forward and when he pinned her to the counter, holding its edges, she knew she could no longer escape. She gasped quietly, sensing her whole body shuddering in a mixture of anxiety, excitement and fear; a combination of feelings she had never experienced before.

He tilted his head to the side and she closed her eyes, feeling a shiver run down her spine the moment his nose brushed hers. For a few seconds, they remained that way; Casey felt his warm breath against her face, practically hearing his screaming thoughts. She was still trying to decide whether she should go against her better judgment and stop overthinking or stop it altogether when his lips touched hers.

At first, it was just a peck; his lips were warm and soft and she sucked in her breath, both from the surprise and the thrill she felt. Whether he was trying not to scare her or struggling with his own thoughts while crossing a new boundary, she didn’t know. But he pulled away just enough to do it again. And again.

And suddenly it wasn’t enough.

She stood on her tiptoes and threw her arms around his neck, deepening the kiss; he responded with a low moan, letting his hands slip to her waist, pulling her closer until all she could feel was their breaths mixing and the marvelous sensation of his skin under hers. The kiss was urgent, almost desperate, as if they had been holding back for too long. Now it was all coming out at once. Casey felt like she was spilling all her secrets to him; every place Derek’s hands touched seemed to be going numb. She had been kissed before, but not like this. This was something else entirely; it was like Derek was peering into her soul, claiming that bruised heart as his.

Casey slid her hand into his hair, her thumbs lightly brushing the exposed skin of his neck, to which he reacted by firmly pressing his body against hers. She sensed a groan forming in

the back of her throat, but suppressed it in fear of breaking that moment, of reminding Derek of what he was doing. He couldn't possibly be in his right mind to be kissing her, but it hardly mattered to her right now. She felt his tongue sliding across her lower lip and sighed in a moment of pure ecstasy.

That was when she heard the sound of jingling keys and her mother's voice in the distance. "Honey, can you grab this bag for me?"

*Shoot.*

Casey broke the kiss sharply, pushing Derek away, causing him to stumble back. He steadied himself and looked at her in astonishment. They were both panting as they stared at each other in silence and she wondered if he was questioning his own sanity like she was doing right now.

*So much for not letting him know about your feelings.*

Casey turned around and ran to the door that would bring her freedom. She raced to the neighboring house and saw the Davises having breakfast through their dining room window. It was Mrs. Davis who greeted her, somewhat concerned to see Casey's agitated state, but Emily saved her from an extremely awkward conversation and accompanied her to her bedroom.

"What the hell happened?" Emily asked eagerly when they reached the top of the stairs.

"I need to be alone now, Em," she managed to say. "*Please.*"

Emily nodded, both worried and curious, and reluctantly left her alone in the guest room. Casey lied down on the bed, calming her breath and trying to reorganize her thoughts. She closed her eyes and found herself automatically raising her hand to her mouth, tracing invisible lines over her lips with her fingertips. Reminiscing over the kiss. Replaying that scene over and over again. Rejoicing at the agonizingly amazing feeling inside her chest. Unable to contain a tiny smile she quickly censored herself for.

Because then it hit her.

*Derek kissed me.*

*I kissed him back.*

*There is no going back from that.*

*What now?*

The answer was simple, but it hurt to even think about it. She was usually one to have complete control over everything in her life, but that fleeting moment of recklessness had proved her that she wasn't to be trusted anymore. And the consequences to her actions would quickly caught up to her, so she had to be quicker. She wouldn't tear her family apart over what she evidently couldn't resist. She had to leave.

If Derek, for some unknown reason, really liked her, they couldn't continue to live together anymore. She didn't even know if he had simply been too caught up in the moment, what with all the yelling and the excessive use of words that implied a little too much. *I don't understand why you would leave us.* Did he know what he was saying? Did he think about

those words before they came out of his mouth? And what was she thinking when she told her she loved him? How long until she spilled everything to him?

Casey grabbed a pillow and screamed into it until her throat hurt. All she wanted now was to go back in time; before she met Derek, before her parents split up and Nora met George.

The thing was, she loved the Venturis.

But she loved one of them more than she should.

## 12. Maybe a Little

---

“Not now, Em,” Casey yelled from her comfortable spot on the bed when she heard a knock on the bedroom door. She had been eyeing the tree that decorated the front yard of the Portmans’ for the past few hours, watching its shadow on the grass move according to the position of the sun.

“I’d be fine with that, but your little visitor might not.”

“*Little?*” Lizzie’s voice echoed in fake indignation.

“Let me feel a little better about being only a few centimeters taller than you.”

Casey settled on the bed; although she hadn’t recovered from the events of that morning yet, the last time she had seen Lizzie had been on Thursday and she missed her sister dearly. The bedroom door was then opened and Lizzie practically jumped onto the bed, hugging her. Casey laughed, tightening her arms around her sister.

“What are you doing here?” she asked when Lizzie released her, looking at her in awe. Emily closed the door and took a seat on the bed next to them.

“Well, you didn’t come to visit. I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too, Liz. I’m sorry, I was a little busy.”

Lizzie rolled her eyes. “I know. I still don’t understand why you had to practically move here to study. There’s plenty of space at home.” That had been Nora’s improvised version to explain Casey’s sudden leaving. Which meant Lizzie still didn’t know about her plans and she needed to tell her as soon as possible — or when her courage decided to show up. That didn’t seem likely.

“With Edwin and Marti at home, it’s a little hard to concentrate,” she said. “And I need to be at my best.”

Lizzie nodded, buying into the lie with an expression of compassion. “I should do the same. Now that Derek’s a boring workaholic, he doesn’t play with Marti anymore and she always asks me to play with her when I’m studying.”

“What’s that about *boring workaholic Derek*?” Emily interjected, curious. Casey glared at her, but she didn’t notice.

Lizzie shrugged. “He’s doing the strangest things. He’s taking extra shifts at work and barely shows up at home. When he wants something, he does it *himself!* Edwin’s never known freedom like this,” she added with an amused chuckle. “Just today, when we came back from the park, he was drinking almond milk. *Almond milk!* Can you believe that? He makes a gag sound every time I drink it.”

“Maybe he was out of options?” Casey offered, trying to end the conversation as soon as possible. She didn’t want to think about Derek, even though that was exactly what she had been doing since that morning.

"I don't know. But it's like he's someone else. No pranks, no bossing Edwin or Marti around. Actually, everything's been so peaceful. It's nice."

Casey looked down at the mattress, hating the feeling of anguish that was eating at her. She hadn't even moved, and Lizzie was already noticing the positive changes in the house without her. It was what she wanted, but it still stung.

"But, I mean," Lizzie corrected herself, probably seeing Casey's expression, "that's the *only* good thing. It sucks not having you there."

Casey forced a smile. "So you guys went to the park today?" she asked, desperate to change the subject.

"Oh, yeah. I had forgotten about that. That was Derek," she said, and Casey almost groaned in frustration. "I heard him bugging George into taking us to the park. Like, for no reason at all. I think he just wanted to be alone. Mom and George are worried about him."

Emily said something to Lizzie, but Casey was no longer listening. She specifically remembered Derek saying he didn't know where their family had gone. He had also acted strangely at that time, but she had no idea he had been responsible for the absence of their parents and step-siblings in the house. Did he only want the house for himself or did he keep them away so she didn't have to face her family? The question continued to echo inside her head until Lizzie had to go home for dinner — not without inviting Casey and Emily to join her first, to which Casey said they needed to study and couldn't make it.

"I'm sorry, Casey," Emily began, after escorting Lizzie to the door, sitting on the bed again. "Lizzie wanted to see you and I didn't know what to tell her. I know you probably want to be alone."

"It's okay. I'm glad she came."

Emily nodded warily. "So, uh... you've been locked inside this room since morning. Aren't you hungry? You didn't eat much of the lunch I brought you."

"No, not really."

"Did something happen this morning?"

"No, I just heard my mom coming. I left the house before she saw me to avoid any questions." *After kissing Derek.* She sighed in defeat, knowing she wouldn't be able to stop the thoughts from taking over her again.

Her mind was a mess. Among the questions that haunted her, the one that stood out the most was why Derek had kissed her. No matter how much she tried to make sense of it, no scenario seemed reasonable enough. He had always despised her, since the beginning. *I, for one, wouldn't try to kiss someone unless they wanted to*, he had once said. Did he feel her catching her breath, her heart racing, her skin tingling, her body yearning to touch him? Did he really know how to read her?

Emily's hand covering hers woke her from her internal crisis. "How are you dealing with... well, *everything*? Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I still can't believe what happened. I just... I wasn't expecting Truman to—" Casey couldn't finish the sentence without a grimace and Emily nodded in agreement.

"No one was expecting that. God, I can't even tell you how much I *hate* this boy," she said in disgust. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that, Casey. You do know I'm here for you, right?"

Casey smiled weakly, squeezing Emily's hands. "Thank you, Em."

"I'm just glad that you're okay. And that Derek was there, because who knows what could have happened?"

She felt a shiver run through her body. That question had been roaming around her mind the night before. "I know. But... Em?"

"Yeah?"

"You said Derek wouldn't be there. Did you *know* he would?"

"Not until I got there, I swear," she hastened to say. "Maybe when we split up, Derek texted me to ask if you were at the party."

"What?"

"And I *may* have told him yes. I checked with Sheldon first for a second opinion and he agreed," she added at Casey's incredulous look, as if that changed everything.

"Now *why* would you do that?"

"Well, I've been... worried."

"About what?"

"About Derek."

"Why?"

Emily raised an eyebrow. "You heard Lizzie, she's noticed it too. Even Sam came up to me, saying that he's not hanging out with the guys anymore, unless it's for hockey practice. He's always missing classes and getting into trouble. I just connected the dots and tried to fix things. Did it even work? Did you two talk?"

"Um..." Casey lowered her head again, trying to hide the red color that painted her cheeks. 'A little. Honestly, I was exhausted and he was... I don't know. He was nice to me.' She still remembered the gentle touch of his fingers on the bruise that had almost vanished from her skin. "But then, this morning... he was being an idiot again. No surprises there. He yelled at me for leaving."

Emily shrugged. "Well, this is... good. Isn't it? He's doing something about his frustration. Right?"

"Emily..."

"Hmm?"

She didn't know if she would have the courage to say it out loud, it would make it all too real. And if, for some reason, Emily unintentionally told someone, she knew what would happen next. She could picture her mother looking at her with disgust, George breaking up

his marriage for everyone's sake, her sister and step-siblings walking away from her. And Derek would be but a memory. She would be left with nothing.

It wasn't like she had anything to lose now, though.

"He kissed me."

The words came out in a whisper and when Emily said nothing within two seconds, she looked up to make sure she had heard her. At first, Emily simply stared at her as if she was still expecting Casey to say something. But little by little, her eyes widened and she brought her hands to her mouth.

"Oh, my God," she said, the sound muffled by the hands that she lowered right after, trying to compose herself. "Okay. Okay, he kissed you. Did you... kiss him back?"

Casey bit her lip, slightly embarrassed. "Yes."

"I see," Emily murmured, clearly suppressing an excited reaction. She cleared her throat and eyed Casey with the best expression of indifference she could manage. "How do you feel about it?"

"I don't know."

"Understandable."

"I'm trying to make sense of this. One minute he's being a jerk, telling me not to expect things from him and the next he's kissing me. What's his problem?"

"He's been struggling with his own feelings for the same reasons you've been struggling with yours. Only he got to the point where he can't hide them so easily anymore. He's always been in control, Casey. But now he's *losing* it because you're leaving and he doesn't know how to act."

Casey felt her heart fluttering in her chest. "Well... if that's true, how come I never noticed it?"

"Is that a real question? You wouldn't know someone had feelings for you if they wrote it in a neon sign for you." At the censuring look Casey cast at her, she shrugged. "It's true. I picked up on Derek quite quickly. It took me a little longer with you, but you're both too strong headed and proud to admit it."

"It's not pride."

"Not even a little?"

"Maybe a little," she admitted.

"Are you so caught up in this game that you don't want to ignore the pride just this once?"

"It's not a game anymore," she said. "Not when it can ruin the lives of everyone I love. That's why I'm leaving, I can't pretend that Derek and I are family anymore."

"How about you figure out what this is before you make any decisions? You need to talk about your feelings. You can't avoid Derek, especially after what happened. You have to *talk*, Casey."

Casey jumped up from the bed. "I need to talk to my mom."

"I think you should talk to *Derek* first."

"No, I... I need to do *this* first."

"Oh." Emily stood up and searched for her eyes. "Okay. Do you want me to go with you?" By the hopeful look on her face, Casey figured her friend had no idea what she was going to tell her mother.

"No, I need to do this alone."

Casey left the room, determined. But before she even reached the sidewalk, she felt her chest painfully empty.

A part of her seemed to be missing already.

## 13. A Few More Minutes

---

Casey still remembered her first day of school back in Toronto, watching the other kids having lunch together, running around and playing tag. She thought about locking herself in the bathroom until Nora came to pick her up, feeling alone.

But this was worse than the feeling she had experienced as a child. This was her personal hell.

She had never felt so alone.

The moment she left the Davis', moved by her lack of courage to go into the house and possibly run into Derek, Casey texted her mother and asked her to meet her on the porch, feeling a sting in her chest; a hint that the decision she had made was crushing her. She was going to live with her father.

Nora cried, and she cried, and they spent a large portion of the night sitting on the second step of the porch. Afterwards, Nora asked her to tell her sister and step-siblings about her plans; Casey figured that Nora hadn't talked to them before because she still had hopes that she wouldn't move.

"I just don't want to talk to Derek," she hastened to say, not caring about what Nora might think. Deep down, her mother knew he was the real reason for her decision, even though she didn't know the specific details. Casey wouldn't be able to look Derek in the eye after what happened, nor would she be able to tell him that she was leaving after he had made it very clear that he didn't agree with the idea.

"Casey, if you just—"

"Please, mom."

Nora's eyes lingered on her face, but she eventually gave in, getting up to call the others. Their reactions didn't differ much from what she had imagined. Edwin heard the news in silence, with a sad expression, without much surprise. He already knew, after all. He didn't even try to argue, but simply excused himself to go to his room. Marti said nothing, but the hurt look she cast at Casey before running into the house was significant enough. However, the look of utter betrayal that Lizzie gave her hurt the most.

"Wow, not even a heads-up?" she said before following Marti, leaving Casey alone with Nora, George and her tears.

Emily wasn't any more pleased. When she heard what Casey had done, she sat on the bed and stared at her. Casey had never seen her so quiet.

"I respect your decision," she said, and Casey thought it was too formal, too distant. But if she tried to argue, Emily would end up convincing her to stay and she couldn't allow herself to change her mind now.

There was a knock on the door and both Emily and Casey turned to it before Mrs. Davis' head popped into the room. "Sorry to interrupt, but Derek is here." Her eyes moved to Casey, who was now in the verge of a breakdown. The mere mention of his name was capable of destroying her inability to think coherently. "He wants to talk to you."

"I don't want to talk to him."

"Mom," Emily interferred, standing up to stand beside Casey, "can you tell him to wait?"

"Sure."

As soon as Mrs. Davis closed the door, Casey turned to her friend, annoyed at her intrusion. Emily didn't even react to the glare she was receiving, merely grabbing her shoulders gently.

"Look, if you want to lie to yourself and hide your feelings, by all means, do that. But if you don't talk to him right now, you're going to regret this. I know you, Casey. So, *please*, just go there and hear him out. Lie to his face or yell at him, but just do it."

The last thing she was looking forward to was the awkwardness and the tension that were bound to welcome them as soon as she saw Derek again. She just *knew* it. She could almost *feel* it, knowing he was standing at the doorstep of Emily's house, waiting for her. She didn't know how she would be able to look him in the eyes; the last time she had done that had been after kissing him. She didn't know what she would find inside them and it scared her.

But Emily was right, and she marched down the stairs with a tortuous feeling of anxiety.

He was standing by the door, his feet planted firmly on the porch and his head sagged down, staring at the floor. She was certain Mrs. Davis had invited him in, but he had chosen not to.

Casey walked the distance left as quietly as possible, her heart fluttering at the sight of the person who had turned her life upside down. He lifted his head when she reached the door, opting to stay inside, setting an invisible barrier between them. She wasn't ready for the rush of emotions that ran through her body when his eyes locked with hers; suddenly, it was impossible to keep the vivid memory of the kiss from replaying in her mind. She crossed her arms, flustered.

"Hey."

"What are you doing here, Derek?" she asked him, her voice sounding a little colder than intended.

The air was suddenly charged with tension, just as she had predicted, and Derek simply stared at her with no apparent intention to answer her question. Maybe *he* didn't even know what he was doing there. It didn't seem like he knew what he was doing for the past *few days*.

Casey looked over her shoulders, in the direction of the living room, where the Davises were having a light conversation on the couch. They seemed extremely concentrated on whatever they were discussing; but for fear of they could eventually hear, she gently pushed Derek away, taking a step forward to stand outside with him. She closed the door and shuddered slightly when the cool breeze of the night blew on her face.

"What happened today—"

*“What happened today?”* she interrupted him, fixing her belligerent gaze on him.

Derek blinked a few times, swallowing as he desperately tried to search for an answer he clearly didn’t have. “Look, I’m sorry,” he said. There was a hint of culpability to his tone, which immediately prodded at her heart, like a knife spearing between her ribs.

He was sorry. He kissed her and now he regretted it and he was sorry. The humiliation seemed to burn her from the inside and she gritted her teeth to keep from crying.

“*You’re sorry?*” Her voice wavered and she hoped he hadn’t noticed it.

“Yeah. I shouldn’t have done that, I don’t know what came over me.”

Casey nodded, biting the inside of her cheek. When she felt the tears prickling her eyes, she lowered her head and stared at the feet, rhythmically tapping the tip of her sneaker on the floor. She wasn’t going to cry; not for him, not in front of him. But it hurt.

“You know, maybe... we just got caught up in the moment,” he continued, calmly, even though she could feel the restlessness emanating from him. Was there a casual way to address one’s step-sibling after making out with them? She was sure the answer was ‘no.’

“Yeah.”

Casey could feel his eyes on her, waiting for something else; something more meaningful than ‘yeah’. But there was nothing else to say. It was great considering, even if momentarily, that he could reciprocate her feelings. It wouldn’t matter if he did, because it would only make everything worse for the both of them, yet she rejoiced on the idea of being liked by him. But having him regretting everything was agonizing.

The silence was too excruciating. Her heart felt too heavy. She felt stupid and weak, like a child believing their own lies to fit their desires, only to be disappointed in the end.

“Casey?” he practically whispered.

She looked up at him, masking her sorrow with coldness. “I think you should go.”

Derek analyzed her face carefully. “Are you mad at me?”

“No.”

“I said I’m sorry.”

“And I heard you loud and clear,” she snapped, irked by his persistence. “Now I want you to leave.”

He didn’t move. Casey would blame it on his pride and challenging nature, if it wasn’t for the confused expression on his face. Certainly he wasn’t expecting her to be as upset as she was right now, especially when he wasn’t the only one to blame in the situation. She could’ve stopped him any minute, yet she chose to kiss him back. Because she wanted to. Not out of carelessness. But she could let him believe it was the latter.

Reluctantly, he acquiesced. His shoulders slumped and he took a step back. “Alright.”

Casey inadvertently moved forward, as if she couldn’t let him go just yet. Derek remained still, frowning at her, sensing the change in the atmosphere. She was only now realizing that

this was probably the last time she would see him before moving away. Her heart clenched woefully.

*Just a few more minutes.*

“Why were you at the party?” she inquired.

“I told you I left work earlier.”

“You texted Emily.”

By the look on his face, that grew agitated quite swiftly, she reckoned he wasn’t expecting her to know about it. Maybe he had asked Emily not to tell her, or maybe he wrongfully trusted Emily not to say anything without asking her first.

“Truman stopped by Smelly Nelly’s before the party. I overheard him saying he’d try to crash it.”

Casey felt a shiver upon hearing Truman’s name and instantly looked away. Surely, she never thought Derek would openly admit to abandoning whatever he was doing to check up on her.

“What, are you going to give me crap for this too? Because you didn’t want me to be there?”

She shook her head, raising her eyes to meet his again. “You just really confuse me, Derek.”

“I never trusted Truman.”

“I know. But you don’t look out for me, that’s not what you do.”

“I think you have a very twisted vision of me.”

“What does that even mean?”

Derek clenched his jaw, his eyes squinting at her. “It means I’m not a fucking monster. If someone I know is in danger, I’m going to help. I just don’t want them to feel like I owe them anything, ever.”

Her voice was harsh and bitter when she replied. “Got it. Just forget it ever happened. All of it.”

He nodded, mimicking her tone. His eyes were marred with resentment. “Fine by me.”

“Great.”

That settled the conversation, but none of them moved. Her minutes were up. And the only thing on Casey’s mind was that those were the last words they would say to each other — meaningless, yet so ironically full of meaning at the same time — before she left. Because she wouldn’t be able to forget all of it, not even if she wished to do so.

She let her eyes slide across his face, as if memorizing every line and every curve, from the light freckles on his skin to the sharped angle of his jaws. He was quietly searching for her eyes, probably wondering what she was doing.

She wanted to kiss him again, just one more time.

But she didn't.

And he didn't do anything when she turned around and entered the house, closing the door on his face.

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She tried to contact Lizzie, Marti and Edwin the day after, but the latter was the only one who agreed to meet her in the Davis' yard after school.

"I'm not mad at you, Casey," he said, shrugging. They were both sitting on the grass, legs crossed, facing the house in front. "I'm just disappointed. You didn't even tell us that you were thinking of leaving. You might as well have just gone and sent us a postcard."

"I'm so sorry, Ed."

"Is it something any of us did?" he asked, pretending to fix his shoelace, which was perfectly tied.

"No. I swear." She hugged him from the side and he relaxed his body, laying his head on her shoulder. "You guys are perfect. And you're the best little brother I could've ever asked for."

Edwin chuckled mockingly and she mirrored him. "I'm going to talk to Lizzie, Marti and Derek," he promised after a few minutes of silence. Casey felt her stomach turning at the mention of the boy's name.

"I think Derek's more than happy to see me far away from here," she commented, forcing a laugh. If she treated the matter with indifference, perhaps she would stop giving so much importance to what had happened. To her own feelings. *To Derek*.

Edwin moved away from her gently and continued to look ahead. "Three years in this house and you still haven't figured out Derek's ways?" He shook his head, as if Casey was a novice in need of training.

"Oh, I know his ways very well."

"Do you? Derek just pretends not to care about things, but that's how you know he does. It's always worked that way. He loves us, but he doesn't want us to know because it'll ruin his rep or whatever."

"Well, don't worry about that. Derek will find another person to torment in no time. Work's going to keep him from doing it to you."

"He's not working anymore," Edwin mentioned, grimacing. "Which means he's definitely doing it to me."

Casey frowned. "He quit?"

"Nah, he was fired. I think he left work in the middle of a shift. His boss told him that he'd lose his job if he left, but he did it anyway. At least that's what I heard when I was eavesdropping. Dad was giving him a lecture today, it was pretty satisfying." He looked up at Casey doubtfully. "Does that make me a terrible brother?"

"Not worse than Derek," she managed to say with a playful smile that felt too forced. Edwin didn't notice. He went on about what else he had heard, emphasizing the parts where George chided his brother, but she was fully focused on the fact that Derek had chosen her over his job once again.

She hadn't seen Derek since the last time they talked, except for the — many — times she went to Emily's room whenever she wasn't home and watched him in his own room from a distance through the window. It made her feel like a stalker at times, so she would often lay on the bed and grit her teeth until they hurt.

He hadn't tried to contact her again. There was no protocol for that — not that she knew of, at least — but she was secretly hoping he would try to reach out. She was aware of how illogical it seemed, especially when she had literally turned his back on him and left him alone the other night. It was pretty self-explanatory.

She had already requested a transfer from school and everything had been arranged for Dennis to pick her up at the end of the week. Whenever Derek wasn't home, she would go to her house to pack her stuff and speak to her family. Casey had had a long talk with Lizzie on Wednesday and they were finally on good terms, which made her feel a little better.

When Saturday came, George helped her check her belongings — everything fit in two suitcases and three cardboard boxes. The moment she closed the door to the room that had been hers for the past three years, Casey didn't expect to feel a sense of anticipated nostalgia. She had always imagined saying a weeping goodbye to that house when she went to college, because it had truly become her home. But she was leaving earlier. She wouldn't wake up to Marti's screams on Sundays anymore or have to kick Edwin out of her room or listen to George's puns or talk about boys with Lizzie. There was something devastating about that.

A few hours earlier, she had heard her mother calling Derek and insisting that he came home to say goodbye to Casey. Apparently, he had slept at Sam's the night before — which he never did, because he hated sleeping at someone else's bed. But when she came down the stairs with a suitcase in hand, he wasn't there. And that was an answer.

She should feel relieved, because seeing Derek after the kiss, and after a whole week, with her family around would have been awkward. But there was a part of her — that illogical part — that hated him for not being there. Even Kendra, Sam and Ralph had showed up at Emily's doorstep the day before to say goodbye; Ralph had shared a few tears, bringing her another cookie jar as a parting gift. But Derek hadn't even asked about her. Emily would've told her.

Taking a deep breath to ignore the tears welling up behind her eyes, she looked at George, who was placing one of the boxes on the couch.

"Are you sure this is it?" he asked, placing a hand on her shoulder. In a way, it looked like he was giving her a second chance to rethink her decision.

"Yeah."

Nora sniffed, wiping her face as she approached her daughter to hug her. "Honey, are you sure about this? There's still time to give up."

Derek had told her that once. It seemed like a century ago now. She was just as tempted to listen to that advice now as she had been then.

"Yes. I'll be fine, mom," she assured Nora, stepping back to smile at her.

"Are you going to call every day?" Lizzie asked.

"Of course, Liz. *Every day.*"

"Are you going to visit us?" Marti asked right after, her eyes wet with the tears she had shed just a few minutes ago.

"Yes, I promise," she stated, crouching down so Marti could hug her. "I'm not going to abandon you, okay? I love you all."

"We love you too."

Marti hadn't even finished the sentence when Casey heard a car parking in front of the house. The air seemed to change with Dennis' arrival, and George was the first to volunteer to take Casey's things to the car, being helped by Edwin. Her heart was beating at the speed of light, poking her painfully in the chest, as if laughing at her. *Are you sure about this?* She didn't have an answer, because she knew that the 'no' that was dancing on the tip of her tongue wouldn't change her situation.

Dennis came in a few minutes later, followed by George and Edwin, greeting everyone.

"Are you ready, kiddo?" he asked Casey.

"Yes," she agreed, her voice wavering. "I'm just waiting for Em—"

Her words were interrupted by the front door opening to an agitated Emily, who seemed to be in the middle of a call. "...up your butt, *I swear I'll do it*," she was hissing into the phone. "Oh, you *better*." Then, as if nothing had happened, she hung up, closed the door and smiled apologetically at everyone. "Sorry about the yelling. And the language."

"You're late," Casey pointed out.

Emily nodded, walking towards her to envelop her in a long hug. "I know, but I'm here now. Happy?"

"Yes."

Freeing herself from Casey, Emily sighed. She looked around, as if assessing the living room, even though she had been there countless times before. Soon, she turned her attention to Dennis. "So, you must be Casey's dad. I'm Emily."

"Dennis. Nice to meet you."

"You too. How have you been? Casey told me you've just moved to the capital."

Casey looked skeptically at her friend. She knew her well enough to know she wasn't interested in her dad's life.

"Yeah, it's been a little crazy, but I've been managing," Dennis smiled, shifting his gaze to Casey. "Case, I think we should get going. It's getting dark and we have a long way ahead of us."

Emily smiled uneasily. "But she can't go without saying goodbye to her family, can she?" she said, pushing Casey a little more aggressively than intended. Casey frowned at her

suspiciously. "Come on, Casey. Say goodbye properly."

Nora pulled her into a tight hug, whispering that she would be a phone call away if she needed anything. It took Lizzie and Marti longer minutes to release her and Edwin tried to hide his emotions with a dialogue that seemed rehearsed.

"Can I have your room?" When Casey looked at him agape, he smiled. "Isn't that what brothers say to sisters when they leave home?"

And pretending not to have been moved by the natural way in which he implied they were siblings, she nodded.

"I'm going to miss you, kid," George said, being the last to hug her.

"Me too, George. Don't tell anyone, but I secretly love your puns."

George laughed and placed a kiss on the top of her head. "I'll make sure to come up with new ones for when you visit."

She nodded and took a step back, slowly scanning the room, as if searching for the face she knew she wouldn't see anytime soon. *Derek isn't coming*, she thought, scolding herself for feeling so betrayed. He himself had told her not to expect things from him. She had been warned. This was entirely her fault. And now her chest was hurting, because she would leave with her last words to him being for them to forget about everything that had happened.

"Did you get everything you needed?" Dennis fished for his car keys in his pocket and approached his daughter. Casey nodded quietly. "Let's go, then?"

"Wait!" Emily practically shouted, smiling with embarrassment when everyone looked at her curiously. 'It's not even that dark,' she said, rolling her eyes. "Hell, it's technically not even nighttime until eight, right? Maybe we should sit down for a while, have some coffee and talk? Dennis, aren't you tired? You *must* be tired from driving for so long."

Casey tilted her head to the side, watching her friend look at her father in anticipation. She was clearly prolonging that moment and she was certain it wasn't for the chance to have more time with her.

"Ah... not really," Dennis replied. "I'm ready to hit the road. But if Casey wants to stay a lit—"

"Awesome! She does, right Casey?" Emily chimed excitedly, grabbing Casey's arm and guiding her into the kitchen, despite her protests.

"Hey!"

"How about we go to the kitchen to make some coffee..."

"I hate coffee."

"Now, don't be selfish, Casey. It's for everyone else. You can have some milk or—" She stopped talking the moment an engine sound became audible to everyone.

The Prince was being parked in the garage.

Casey's heart stopped for a second.

## 14. Better Judgement

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She looked at Emily with wide eyes, feeling the thrilling mixture of fear and excitement that tickled her stomach. Her friend smiled radiantly, gently squeezing her shoulders before leaving the kitchen and returning to the living room. She wanted to react — meaning taking Dennis' hand and running to his car without looking back, — but she was petrified.

Casey heard the car door being slammed shut, followed by hurried steps, and suddenly her body was aching for Derek. He appeared in seconds, gruffly pushing the door open and stopping in his tracks the moment he saw her.

His eyes softened over her, although they contained an intensity that made her let out a shaky breath. Everything seemed to stop: time, pain, her own heart. Then, all the memories came back at once: him asking why she was leaving in that exact same spot, his lips crashing hers, her body getting goosebumps, the feeling of his exposed skin under her fingers, the confirmation that she was hopelessly in love with him.

She didn't miss the moment everything came back to normal, when Derek decided to walk towards her with determination, his eyes never leaving her face. Casey didn't have time to catch her breath, because suddenly his hands were on her face and he was covering her lips with his own.

It took her four seconds to react. Her eyes fluttered shut and her hands flew to his chest, where his wild heartbeat matched hers. His hands remained on her face, holding her so softly that she melted into his touch, pressing her body against his. Their breaths mixed as a wave of emotions took control of her body, making her tremble and the hair on her arms stand up. She delved into that feeling, swimming in the waters of bliss and safety.

*Derek. Derek. Derek.* It was like a song stuck in her head, one she couldn't stop rewinding.

She slowly slid her hand to his shoulders, her thumbs brushing his neck as he gradually stopped the kiss, pulling away. That moment, Casey thought, would be seared into her memory forever; not only the kiss, but the way he stared at her after it: his lips parted, his breathing fast, the look of wonder in his face, like she was the most beautiful creature to ever walk on earth.

"What are you doing here?" she managed to whisper.

He risked a tiny smile. "Now it was Emily who texted me. And then she threatened me."

"You knew I was leaving," she accused him, letting her hands drop to her sides.

Derek's smile vanished, being replaced by an expression of hopelessness. He shook his head and let his hands slide to her arms. "I know, Casey! I stayed up the whole fucking night, because I was so mad at you. And I don't want to feel that way anymore, but you keep fucking with me."

"What? I— Why?"

"Because I kissed you. And you kissed me back, you blamed it all on me and you still want to go."

Casey swallowed, her eyes going involuntarily to his lips for a few seconds. "Why did you kiss me?"

"Casey," was his reply, as if she should know the answer by now. He frowned in an expression of convalescence.

"Tell me."

He hesitated, looking at the very hands that still held her arms. Slowly, he lowered them until they fell perpendicular to his body. "I tried to fight whatever I was f-f-feeling for a long time. But then you were leaving anyway and what did I have to lose?" He lifted his hands and rubbed them over his face. "Shit."

*Feelings.* She needed a few seconds to recover, that conversation was making her dizzy. Apparently, Emily was a spectacular observer. All her statements were being confirmed before Casey's eyes; it was almost ridiculous how she had started all of Casey's problems with one of her insightful observations and was now trying to fix everything.

"You didn't even *talk* to me after the other night. You were *gone*. You wouldn't even be here if Emily hadn't—"

"You didn't talk to me. You were gone for days. Casey, you moved out of the house, you only visited us whenever I wasn't home. I tried talking to you and you told me to go away. What did you want me to think?"

"You said you were sorry. Like you regretted it."

"I was feeling like shit, because I thought you were mad at me," he said, frustrated. Miscommunication had always been a part of their lives, but she never expected it to be the cause of such an odd fight. Were they really angrily confessing their feelings in the middle of another one of their classic arguments? It seemed very likely. "It was bad timing, after what happened at the party. *That's* what I was sorry about. And then you shut me out."

She shook her head. "I just didn't want to tear our family apart. I can't live with you here knowing that I don't see you as a brother."

"Stepbrother," he corrected her. "And I've been doing it for years."

"Well, you never acted on it."

"I might have. Fuck, *I did*."

She didn't know why they were having that conversation right now. Everything had already been ruined by the time Emily decided to practically drag Derek into that house to talk to her.

It was only then, with a mortifying realization, that she remembered that her family was witnessing everything from the living room. They probably couldn't hear them, but they surely could see them. The fear of meeting looks of disgust and contempt prevented her from looking at them; she didn't even know why George and Nora hadn't interrupted them yet.

"I mean, it was about damn time," Marti said.

Involuntarily, Casey and Derek turned to the direction of the youngest in time to see their family looking at them with knowing smiles; except for Dennis, who looked completely bewildered. Emily stared at them like a proud mother, her hands intertwined under her chin with a cunning look.

"Language, Marti," George chided her.

Edwin let out an amused laugh, giving Lizzie's shoulder a light pat. "Damn, Liz, you owe me twenty bucks. You can even pay me in installments, I'm feeling generous."

"You guys were *betting* on it?" Marti asked, manifesting Casey's own doubt. She pouted. "Why wasn't I invited?"

Casey studied the faces of each member of her family with confusion. Of all the scenarios she had envisioned if they ever found out about her feelings for Derek, that one hadn't even been considered. Did they support them? More importantly, had they always *known* about it?

"Am I... missing something?" Dennis spoke up, searching for someone who would understand his utter perplexity.

*I certainly am.*

"Wait, aren't you all...?" Casey couldn't find a word to complete the sentence, but she assumed that they would fill it in according to their own opinions.

Nora was the first to walk towards them, while the others followed silently. Dennis was still shifting his gaze among the faces around him, looking for an answer to what was going on; Emily took pity on him, comfortably patting his arm when everyone settled in the kitchen.

"It didn't take me long to figure out what was going on," Nora said. "At first, I was worried. But it was becoming clearer that you two had no idea. I talked to George and we decided to be careful. It was all new to us too, but we thought that with time, you'd eventually get used to the idea of being family. It just never happened."

"You... you don't think it's bad?" Casey asked quietly, almost ashamed to say it aloud. She noticed Derek's furtive look in her direction and wondered if that had never been an issue for him.

It was George who answered, placing a hand on Nora's shoulder. "You're not related. You weren't even *raised* together. There's nothing bad about it."

"And we don't choose who we love, now, do we?" Nora added, looking adoringly at George.

"Whooooa, there," Derek hastened to say, raising his hands, which unleashed a series of chuckles from the others.

"All I'm saying is that you have no reason to worry. We don't expect you to go to extreme measures because you can't see each other as siblings. It's not something we can force you to do."

"But... you don't understand," Casey insisted. "I can't stay here anymore, mom."

"Or I could get my own place," Derek suggested, eliciting surprised reactions from everyone, including Casey. She looked up at him in wonder and he shrugged. "I could share an apartment with the guys. I saved some money, I'll get another job. I'm going to college next year, anyway."

"Absolutely not," George denied. "None of you needs to leave this house."

"We'll make it work, okay?" Nora continued, shifting her gaze between Casey and Derek. "We always do."

"Plus, you clearly have full support here," Lizzie added, to which Emily, Edwin and Marti promptly nodded their heads in agreement beside her.

Casey smiled, genuinely touched by their unexpected support. She never thought of Derek as a brother or even part of her family, for that matter. But she was certain that in the minds of the people that she loved, she was supposed to. And if she didn't, she feared they would give their relationship the name that haunted her sleep. It wasn't incest, she knew it. But it didn't stop people from thinking that. And having her family looking at her with reassuring smiles rather than judging eyes, was liberating. A feeling of peace and joy filled her chest and she felt her eyes watering.

"Whatever you decide, you'll always have full support here," George agreed.

"Maybe we should go outside and give them a second," Emily suggested.

Everyone nodded in silence and Casey lowered her head the moment the front door was closed and they were left alone in the frightening and exciting silence of the house. She had the approval of their family, the hope of not needing to move out of the house and abandon the people she loved, and the desire to send her worries and doubts to hell and kiss Derek again. Maybe for more than a few seconds. Maybe more than once.

"Casey."

She looked up at him and noticed the way her hands were shaking. Suddenly, she didn't know what to do with them and decided to shove them inside her pockets to prevent her from embarrassing herself. However, she slowly felt her body calming down as she noticed Derek's unusual uneasiness. He was nervous.

Derek Venturi was nervous.

Derek Venturi was nervous because of *her*.

"So, uh... I had no idea we were being so..."

"Obvious?" she tried.

"That's *one* word for it."

Casey nodded, taken aback by his lack of eloquence. It was as if he had spent his vocabulary in the first five minutes after entering the house, but was now out of words.

"Well, I didn't..." she began, and his eyes bore into hers eagerly. "I hadn't noticed."

"No kidding," he jeered, offering her a crooked smile that set her heart ablaze. He was regaining his confidence and she knew it was due to the imminent teasing she would suffer in

a few seconds.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“That I knew you had no idea you were flirting with me the whole time. Which actually made it ten times better.”

She gasped. “*Flirting with you?*”

“What, you think siblings argue with each other like this?” he said huskily, taking one step further and practically decimating the space between them. She swallowed when he lowered his chin, breathing so close to her that she shivered. “Or get jealous when the other is dating?”

“I wasn’t—I—*What?*”

Derek grinned and her eyes went to his lips like a moth attracted by light.

“Or get nervous when they’re too close?” his voice was barely a whisper when he finished that sentence and Casey felt her knees weakening, cursing herself for being so easily taunted. He was so close to kissing her again that she could feel her stomach turning excitedly, desperately waiting for him to do it. “Casey?”

“*What?*”

“My eyes are up here,” he mocked in a normal tone, which made her blush violently, while he chuckled and pulled away just enough to look at her. “It’s so easy to tease you that it’s almost unfair. Not that I’m planning on stopping, though. Tradition and all that.”

She blinked to regain her composure, even though she wasn’t able to step back and reestablish some space between them. Standing so close to him was torture, and gave him ammunition to tease her even more, but she enjoyed it — maybe a little too much.

“I do know how to read you, you know?”

She remembered the brief conversation they had a few nights before, when she bumped into him in the middle of the night. Now that she revisited the memory with a new perspective, it all seemed so... obvious. *Like you can read me at all*, she had said. And maybe she thought she was simply standing up to him, when in fact, she had been flirting. Almost challenging him. She was lucky he hadn’t accepted the challenge that night.

“Oh, my God,” she wailed, shoving her face into her hands.

“I know, it’s so embarrassing,” he continued to mock her, unsurprisingly. “Can you imagine what would’ve happened if I didn’t have some self-control? You should probably *thank* me.”

She glared at him. “Derek, I swear to God—”

He raised his hands to his chest in a defensive gesture, moving them to hold her upper arms right after. “It’s fine,” he said, his voice a little softer as he grinned at her. “You just make it too easy.”

“Well, if you knew, then... why wouldn’t you just... I don’t know.” It was frustrating; she wanted to know why he hadn’t said anything to her when he realized what was happening — granted she wouldn’t have believed him and would probably have slapped him, but it

would've spared them time and a few sleepless nights. Maybe she wouldn't have had to deal with Truman, even.

"What, did you want me to kiss you? Well, I mean, *I knew* you did," he said matter-of-factly, rolling his eyes, "but you would've freaked out. *And* I was trying to be a good person. *And* there was the whole blended family thing," he added, with a shrug, as if it wasn't as important.

"You never thought it was wrong?"

"I thought there was *definitely* something wrong with me for losing sleep over *you*," he said sarcastically. Casey hit his chest with her fists and he smirked. "Come on, Casey. I never saw you as a sister, but it was what our parents expected of us and I wasn't about to ruin my dad's life for what I thought was just my mind messing with me."

"Forbidden territory and all that?"

"Yeah."

She hesitated before asking the next question, feeling embarrassed beforehand. "And are you sure that's not all it is?"

Derek didn't seem to take offense. "Unfortunately, I'm sure."

Casey tried to suppress the sarcastic smile that was dancing on her lips. "My bad, that question was stupid. You were *actually* willing to leave your precious house for me."

He scoffed. "Please, that was just a bluff."

She smiled and his lips mirrored hers involuntarily. She almost never got to see Derek smiling genuinely, unless he was with Marti or caught up in a spontaneous moment. The fact that he was looking at her with that smile and glistening eyes made her feel uneasy. Like she mattered so much more to him than what she was ready to accept. It wasn't her mind playing tricks on her; he had never looked at anyone else like that. Yet, there was still a tiny spot in her heart, filled with insecurity, that told her it was impossible for him to want *her*.

Derek must have read her thoughts through her countenance. "Look, I told you I don't turn girls into a challenge. If I'm willing to go against my better judgement—"

Casey stared at him with incredulity. "*Better judgement?*"

"You're a clumsy, grade-grubber... goodie-two-shoes nerd."

She gasped. "That's *redundant*, you idiot. And you're... an arrogant jerk. And an *idiot*, have I mentioned that?"

"At least ten times a day," he said wryly. "Quite the duo. I might be out of my mind."

Casey rolled her eyes, ready to playfully smack him again, but he held her hands against his chest. She could feel his heart beating under her palms and it felt so soothing she relaxed her body.

"What about it?" she asked.

“I want to do this,” he replied without a hint of humor in his voice. She couldn’t remember the last time he had said anything with such determination and that was enough to lighten the weight of all the things she had been carrying over her shoulders for the past few days. She felt his heartbeat quickening by the second, as if her suspense was afflicting him. Maybe she could learn how to use his own strategies against him in their game, if she was smart.

But that was for another day.

“Me too.”

## 15. Epilogue: No One Loses

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“De-rek!”

Casey heard his laughter from the other side of the bathroom door, followed by heavy steps as she opened the door to see him running towards the stairs in the hall. Her hands and arms were now glistening with the pink glitter he had stolen from Marti and mixed into her moisturizer.

Why she ever thought that dating him would make him stop pranking her was beyond her, because it had only been one week and nothing had changed — Derek still teased her until they fought over the stupidest things and they still found ways to pick on each other, only now it always ended up with them making out in his room.

Nora and George were more than understanding towards them, which still amazed Casey, although she knew their trust was solely put in her. For good measure, there were rules now; Derek was constantly inclined to break them, but Casey made sure he followed them every time.

The ground rules were written on a blue post-it and stuck to the fridge and consisted of them not staying home alone, not leaving their bedroom doors closed and not kissing in front of the kids. The latter was quite easy for Derek, since he wasn’t very fond of public displays of affection; so, unless he wanted to gross Marti out, which he loved doing, he never kissed her for more than two seconds in front of others. It still never failed to make her blush.

They hadn’t told anyone at school besides Sam — who also didn’t express much surprise, but was quite happy for them both — and Emily promised not to get the word out. Derek had no problem with people knowing about their relationship, but Casey couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable with the possibility of judgement. Most people at school didn’t know they weren’t *actual* siblings. Derek went along with it, but rumors quickly began to spread when he started choosing her over his friends more frequently and they were never seen arguing around the halls anymore, but rather talking and laughing flirtatiously.

Truman changed schools after the infamous party, but Casey only knew about it when she transferred back. She had blocked his number from her phone, not before Emily texted him with a few bad words and a threat to stick her shoe somewhere she didn’t dare repeating. It felt like things were finally getting back into place. Even Paul had interrupted her endless and hopeful speech about her plans for college the day before, dropping his sandwich to direct his attention to her.

“I’m sorry, is everything okay at home? Is Derek still around?” he asked, curiously.

And when she proceeded to say that things were okay with him, Paul placed his hand on her forehead, checking for a fever. He had an existential crisis for five minutes after that.

“Derek, come back here!” Casey sprinted after the boy down the stairs, jumping on his back when they reached the living room. His laughter was quickly joined by hers and she smacked his chest with her hands.

"Hey, you're getting glitter all over me!"

"Don't worry, you look *brilliant*."

He groaned dramatically. "Please, stay away from my dad. This pun may be the worst thing I've ever heard."

When she smacked his chest again, stronger this time, Derek started walking backwards, leaning his body back so that Casey had no option but to fall on the couch.

"De-rek!"

He chuckled again and she grabbed the hem of his shirt to push him down, causing him to fall on top of her; he steadied himself by landing on his elbows to prevent from hurting her. Derek slowly lowered his head to lay it on her stomach and they both stayed there in silence for a few seconds, normalizing their breaths.

"Why would you do that?" she asked, finally.

"What reason would you have to fight me for if I didn't?"

He had a point. Honestly, she had experimented a couple of weeks without Derek or his pranks and it didn't feel right. She needed his challenges and his bragging and the still surprisingly soft and tender side of him that came alive whenever they finished their arguments.

Here's the thing: Casey knew the two first steps very well, because challenges and bragging had always been part of her life; but she was still getting used to the third one, that she had never stuck around to see — and Derek had never stuck around to *show* her before. It was that exact same side of him that made him relax his body and allow her to play with his hair so naturally. It still amazed her how quickly he always melted into her touch, closing his eyes. She watched his chest rising and falling calmly for a few moments of silence.

"You're getting glitter all over my hair now," he warned her.

"Why did you think I started playing with it?"

"Casey, I have to go to work in thirty minutes."

Casey smiled devilishly, even though he couldn't see her. "Well, in *that* case." She began to rub her hands across his face and he suddenly opened his eyes and sat up, trying to break free from her grip. She knew he was stronger than her and could just as easily liberate himself, but he simply stood there on the couch, with his back turned to her.

"Shit, remind me again why I fell in—" he stopped mid-sentence, causing Casey to hold her breath and cease their playful game at the same time, astonished. She saw the muscles on his back tensing up and tried to see his complexion, but his face was facing forward. "—to this dark hole of madness," he completed.

Casey sneered. "Really?"

"Really."

She carefully placed her chin on his right shoulder and felt him stiffening for a few seconds before relaxing again. He still hadn't gotten used to being touched by her unwittingly.

"You want to take it back?"

"Take what back? I didn't say anything."

Casey smiled to herself, feeling a sense of lightness within. "Okay, then."

Derek turned his head partially to the side, allowing her to see his profile, and for a second she thought he was about to let it all out. But he only smirked and got up, saying he needed to get ready for work.

She needed a few minutes before going back to her room. Later, she went to Emily's to start a project for their History class and they ended up talking about college, prom and what Emily's relationship with Sheldon had been like since he had gone back to his town. All the while, she couldn't stop thinking about Derek's almost confession, but she never mentioned it. Not even to Derek himself. They were constantly teasing each other and subtly addressing the issue, treating it like one of their games. Like 'whoever says it first, loses'.

Up until the next Friday, when Derek asked her out on their first official date. She had been a little busy studying and he had been working extra hard on hockey practice and on trying to find another job, so he managed to settle on a date when they could both take some time off.

Derek wasn't the romantic type, and she knew that from watching his past relationships — and living with him. He didn't shower her with compliments or prepare special dinners, but she read between the lines every time he let her listen to pop music — which he hated — on the car, or let her steal food from his plate, or offered her a dark chocolate bar saying he bought it for her when she knew he hated dark chocolate. She never talked about it and he was silently grateful for that.

And now he was taking her to an outdoor movie exhibition. She didn't know whether he knew she had always wanted to go to one of those or if he had picked it randomly, but the movie was old — because she loved old cinema — and it was an action movie — because it was his favorite genre — and that seemed like the best compromise.

They sat down on the grass of the location where the movie was being shown and Casey looked around, nervously. There were only older people there, save for a few couples in their early twenties. She sighed in relief, feeling safe for not finding any known faces from school.

"No one our age is actually going to do something so lame," Derek had told her with an easy grin before they got into the car, and that was when she confirmed that he, in fact, was doing it for her.

She felt him moving closer to her and cocked an eyebrow at him as he slightly steered back and mumbled a "there's a fly on your shoulder", pretending to shoo the imaginary insect before lifting his arm to place them around her shoulders.

"Aww, like father, like son," she cheered mockingly, to which Derek replied with a scoff.

"Please, this is nothing like my dad's move or whatever he calls it. I have class."

"That's okay. I'm a sucker for this kind of lame stuff, after all" she said, quoting his own words.

She looked up at him, beaming, but he continued to stare ahead, even though his lips quirked upwards in the subtlest way. “I’m regretting this already.”

“Hey,” she began, adding as much sarcasm as she could to her voice, “remember when you said you’d never ask me out? Good times.”

“Okay, you’re hanging out with me too much. Leave the sarcasm for the pros, will you? Not to mention *you* said you’d never agree to go out with me *either*.”

She chuckled and leaned into his side, feeling him tightening his grip around her. That argument seemed to date back to another century now, fragments of words that were meant to mask their own insecurities and desires. Not that Derek expressed his desires that often, but he always managed to leave her breathless with a single kiss. Because, indeed, he knew how to read her better than she could read herself. And that was enough.

They were twenty minutes into the movie when he spontaneously shoved his nose into her hair, waited a few seconds and whispered a faint “I think I love you.” Casey suddenly couldn’t hear the movie anymore, because her heartbeat was blocking every sound within at least one kilometer. Her chest felt suddenly filled with warmth and love and she needed a full minute to recover from the shock and joy that overwhelmed her body.

She felt him tensing up and she knew him well enough to know that he was beating himself up for saying too much when she didn’t reply immediately.

“I love you, too,” she responded determinedly, which promptly made his body relax.

That was the first time Derek consciously chose to lose their little game. She never ceased to remind him about it, and every time she did it, he would only roll his eyes and smirk, stealing a kiss when no one else was looking. Yet she knew, just as well as he did, that he didn’t lose that game.

It was a tie — and they both won every time.